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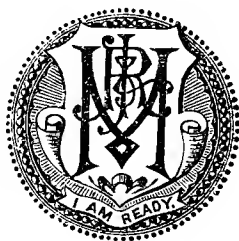
BY

“ RITA ”

AUTHOR OF “DAME DURDEN,” “MY LADY COQUETTE,” “LIKE
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VIVIENNE.



B O O K I.

CHAPTER I.

THE CHÂTEAU OF RENONÇEUX.

“Half light, half shade
She stood ; a sight to make an old man young.”

THE dusky shade of a green wood.

Golden bars of sunshine are slanting through the trees ; the morning dews gleam from the opening hearts of wild flowers, and on the spear-like blades of waving grasses. Above stretches the wide, warm beauty of a cloudless sky—a sky that glows with rose and sapphire as the dawn touches it with a farewell kiss, and leaves it to the fuller splendour of the waking day.

The wood stands on a southern hill-side in the fair vine country of Lorraine. The land is bright with the new-born beauty of spring—glorious with light, replete with colour wherever the eye wanders. The young vines have just begun to uncurl their delicate tendrils ; the breath of budding blossoms weighs on every breeze. Through the corn-fields and bridle-roads there is a delicious, delicate gleam of tender green, or wondrous flushes of pale pink from the almond and peach trees. The grasses are crimsoned with tulips ; every nook is sweet with odours of violets, and where the silver light of the winding river catches the sun's rays, there rises the faint blue vapour of the morning mists, or the smoke of a barge lazily drifting on the quiet water, while its owners sleep.

Beyond the wood a broad white road is visible, bordered on either side by flowering chestnuts, and winding downwards into

a valley from whence it again ascends, and leads on through breadths of corn-land and fragrant orchards, till it is lost in the distance. In the heart of the wood where the shadows are deepest a tiny brook runs merrily along, singing a song of its own to the lilies and forget-me-nots which grow on its borders ; but the lilies are not the only listeners this fair spring morning, and the shy forget-me-nots, as they peep into the waters to see their own reflection, behold another vision there to.

A young girl stands by the brook-side, smiling down at the waters which mirror her own loveliness. Only a girl of some sixteen summers, bare-headed, poorly clad, but beautiful exceedingly, with that beauty which no poverty can hide. The slender form owes nothing to the coarse, ill-fitting garments which may disfigure but cannot conceal its perfect grace and rounded outlines. The lustrous eyes, and tender poetic face, are eloquent with thought and feeling; but the loveliness that makes the face so infinitely witching is something purer and deeper than even its external perfection—it is the beauty of a lovely soul, a pure and noble spirit.

She seems in deep thought, as she lingers there in the warm spring glory of the early day. The light breeze kisses her hair. The birds overhead sing loud and sweet, but she scarcely heeds them. The musing languor deepens in her eyes, and some wave of deeper feeling, some touch of graver thought shadows the innocent calm of the girlish face, and, while taking nothing from its beauty, gives that beauty a sweeter, sadder meaning.

“What a picture for an artist !”

These words, uttered just loud enough to reach her ear, startle her suddenly from her abstraction. Glancing hastily round she observes two figures on the path beyond, attentively watching her. The hot, swift colour flies to her cheek as she becomes conscious of their scrutiny, and as if that scrutiny were in some way offensive to her she turns hastily away, and unheeding the laughing salutation which follows her departure, disappears with rapid steps in an opposite direction.

“Too bad, really ! Have I frightened her, De Verdreuil ?” questions the younger of the two men who have disturbed her solitude so abruptly. “But I say what a lovely face to find in these woods of yours ! Do you know who she is ?”

“I can’t say I do—a *paysanne*, or cottager’s daughter, I suppose. I have been so long absent from Renonçeux that I can claim no knowledge of its sylvan divinities. Have you fallen a victim to this new face already, Legard ? You look moon-struck enough. How you do rave about the *beau sexe* to be sure ! The very sight of a petticoat puts all your ideas to flight with the exception of one—that of making love to its owner !”

"True enough!" laughed the other. "But how am I to help it, Raoul? I was born to adore women—it's my nature. I believe I fell in love with my nurse at the tender age of three, and since then I have gone on improving."

"Improving, Gaston?"

"Well, my dear fellow, don't look supercilious over it. I know what a cynic you are in these matters, but make allowances for others who find charms in the pursuits you despise."

"*Le jeu ne vaut pas la chandelle*, in my opinion. Thank goodness I have no time to waste on women, and less inclination than time. Flirtations are only for idle fellows like you, Legard!"

"Lucky for me, I say. Love-making is the poetry and essence of life. Fancy preferring politics to bright eyes, and ministerial *embroglerie* to boudoir intrigues. It will be all the worse for you one day though, *mon ami*."

"Indeed—and why?" asked his companion, raising his eyebrows with a faint gesture of disdain.

"Why? Because I never yet knew one of you cold, cynical individuals who despise or affect to despise women, who did not do one of two things; worship hopelessly a very cold one, or fall madly in love with a very bad one. Take my word for it, De Verdreuil, you'll do one or other yet."

"My dear Gaston!" laughed the other; "it is no use arguing about it, I know, for we should never agree. It seems to me 'a folly's crown of folly,' if I may venture to use such a parody, for any man to sigh and languish, and make himself an object of compassion and ridicule to all beholders for the sake of a woman. Thank God I have never done it, nor do I mean to begin, if I can help it."

"All very fine to talk," laughed the other. "One of these days, Raoul, you will find that your heart is not so invulnerable as you imagine. Even Achilles had his weak point, you know!"

"Of course as you pass your whole existence in love-making, Legard, you cannot believe that I really mean what I say on the subject. Change, it pray—there's a good fellow. I promised to show you the finest view of the château, did I not? Just wait till we turn this point, and then look at something fairer even than a woman's face—at least, in my opinion."

An exclamation of involuntary admiration fell from Gaston Legard's lips, as he obeyed his companion's directions.

They were out of the wood now, and on the summit of the hill which sloped gradually down to the park and estates of Renonçœur, one of the oldest and noblest possessions in Lorraine, and belonging to a race old and famous as itself. At present it was

owned by Raoul de Verdreuil, father of the dark, grave-looking man, who now stood gazing down at his prospective possessions with mingled pride and admiration. The château, with its grey towers and sloping terraces, its famous gardens blushing with roses from end to end, was very old and very beautiful. It looked tranquil and innocent enough now in the clear soft morning light, but it had a host of traditions, of blood-stained records, and terrible deeds surrounding it. Those shady, odorous gardens, full of the murmurs of birds and bees, and sweet with the fragrance of scented winds, bore many and mournful memories ; had witnessed scenes of guilt, and woe, and passion ; had heard love-tales both reckless and despairing. But there were no voices to speak of it now, for Nature keeps her secrets so faithfully and well, that no living mortal ever yet accused her of confidence betrayed.

Raoul de Verdreuil, whose grave, dark eyes rested with mingled pride and affection on his beautiful home, was the last of his race ; a race famous for loyal courage, for a lofty, stainless pride in name and possessions, for dauntless chivalry and unimpeachable honour ; yet a race who had won more fear than love, more admiration than regard. Kings had known the value of their services, changing dynasties had felt the terrible influence of their power. The courtly graces and faultless chivalry of the old *régime* still lingered round them, but their ruling passion was pride—a lofty, self-sufficient pride, that never brooked insult, or forgave dishonour ; that held aloof from the follies, and passions, and failings of the day, more because they deemed them unworthy of imitation, than that they really despised them. A pride that had broken many hearts, cursed many lives, and yet was inherent in each successor.

“ Well, was I not right in telling you the view was worth the trouble of the walk ? ” said Raoul de Verdreuil, breaking the silence at length, and turning towards his friend.

“ It is splendid—magnificent ! ” was the reply. “ Ah ! De Verdreuil, I am inclined to envy you, indeed. Not only have you won a position for yourself in the ministerial world, but you have all this wealth and property in prospect. Truly fortune has smiled upon you to some purpose ! ”

“ Yes ; I have not much to complain of, ” was the answer.

“ And yet I daresay you are not content, ” said Gaston Legard, laughing. “ I wonder if any of us ever *are* content with our life, and sphere, and prospects. I don’t believe it. Look at yourself for instance ; instead of living quietly at home or enjoying yourself, without any trouble, you must needs plunge into all the *émbroglia* of ministerial life, and worry yourself from morning to night with diplomatic stratagems which carry

you off to all parts of the globe, when you might be amusing yourself in Paris. How foolish it seems to me!"

"Only because you are differently constituted," said Raoul de Verdreuil, smiling. "What seems to you delightful and amusing is to me little else than boredom and ennui. I get so heartily sick of the intrigues, follies, and scandals of fashionable life, that I am thankful to fly from it at every opportunity. My ambition lies in winning fame, in achieving distinction, in tasting the sweets of power, and ruling, instead of being ruled. Yours, Legard," he added, laughing, "consists of conquests of which you tire as soon as they are achieved, and sunning yourself in smiles, whose very sweetness palls upon your fancy in the space of a month."

"Quite as sensible a proceeding, it seems to me, as that of playing the part of 'Monkey and roasted Chestnuts' to a Court," was the quick retort, "in settling petty ministerial squabbles, in flying abroad at a moment's notice to fulfil impossible instructions, or suavely endeavouring to pacify countries who quarrel over split hairs. What pleasure can such a life have? To me it is an incomprehensible mystery."

"I suppose so," was the quiet answer. "Well, we won't pursue the subject, Legard; as we only seem inclined 'to agree to differ' respecting it. Shall we go back the way we came, or would you prefer a change of route?"

"I suppose there's no chance of the 'pretty *paysanne*' appearing on the scene again," said Gaston Legard regretfully. "Well, I will trust to your choice, De Verdreuil, you know more of the locality than I do."

"Come this way, then," said his friend, leading the way down the hill, and turning into a broad road shaded by large and magnificent trees, which appeared to run straight in the direction of the château. They proceeded slowly along, discussing subjects grave or gay at intervals, but it was evident their minds were of too dissimilar a nature for any great sympathy to exist between them.

"By the bye, De Verdreuil," remarked Gaston Legard, as they were nearing the entrance gates, "how do you like the new inmate of Renonçœur? Your beautiful and juvenile *belle-mère*; your manner does not give me the idea of her advent being a pleasant one to you. I suppose the change was not agreeable?"

A flush rose to the dark, handsome face of Raoul de Verdreuil at this inquiry, and a strange light gleamed in his eyes, which might have warned his companion that he was treading on dangerous ground.

"No change could be exactly agreeable that interfered between the close relationship and complete confidence of my

father and myself," he said, coldly. "However his happiness is above all selfish considerations, and where it is concerned my own feelings must not interfere."

"I know that very well ; your love for your father used to be a byword among us even in your school days, Raoul ; but nevertheless, I should scarcely think that the sudden introduction of a young and beautiful woman like the Countess de Verdreuil into your domestic life was quite welcome to such a woman-hater as yourself. What changes she has made in Renonçeux already !"

The calm, grave face of the young count grew paler and harder than its wont at these careless words ; it was evident that the discussion was not a pleasant one to him, though he skillfully evaded any expression of his real feelings.

"Changes for the better, you must allow, Gaston," he said lightly. "The old château wanted brightening up, I am sure, and female influence, however much it interferes with the serious interests of life in my opinion, is yet a necessary evil sometimes. The place looked quite dreary and deserted a year ago, and look at it now !"

"It is lively and gay enough, at all events, under the rule of its present châtelaine," answered the other. "She knows how to make life enjoyable, does she not, De Verdreuil ?"

"According to your views of enjoyment, yes," said Raoul de Verdreuil ; "but you know our opinions differ very widely on that subject."

"And on a good many others, eh, De Verdreuil ? Well, we've no more time for arguments or disagreements either, for here comes your *fidus* Achates to meet you. I suppose I'd better beat a retreat, for you two will be up in the clouds, and raving about celestial chords, and divine harmonies, and goodness knows what."

"Nonsense," said the other, sharply ; "Albert Hoffmann can talk about other things beside music, Legard. Don't hurry away like that."

As he spoke the object of these remarks came up to them.

He was a young man, apparently about eighteen or nineteen years of age, but he might have been even less, so fair and boyish was the delicate face, so slight and almost fragile the figure. Many people looking at that dreaming brow, those soft, violet eyes, and tender, mobile lips, called the face "womanish," and womanish perhaps it was in its extreme beauty of form and colouring. Albert Hoffmann looked what he was—a poet—a dreamer—an artist whose whole soul was filled with dreams of some impossible greatness, some beauty and divinity that only vexed the humanity which vainly strove to shape and clothe it in

more material forms. Of life in its grosser, harsher phases Albert knew scarce anything. He had been carefully sheltered from all such knowledge by his guardian, Raoul's father, and he had lived at Renonçœur as long as he could remember.

A few words will tell his history as he joins Raoul de Verdreuil and Gaston Legard, and walks with them up to a side entrance of the château. His father was a German nobleman, who had married a beautiful singer, a fair dazzling creature of no known parentage, but of great gifts. They had both died, and the Count de Verdreuil being the chief and only friend of the Graf von Hoffmann, undertook the sole charge and care of his infant son, who seemed to have inherited all his mother's genius and beauty. Albert Hoffman had no remembrance of either of his parents; he had grown up and associated with scarce any one but Raoul de Verdreuil and his father—grown up with an artist's soul within his fragile, delicate form, and a poet's dreams of all things beautiful in his heart.

He loved Raoul devotedly—worshipped and admired him perhaps all the more, for the very contrast his splendid physical powers and cultivated intellect presented to his own fragile strength and dreamy nature. His constitutional delicacy had interfered in a great measure with his education, and his nervous dread of public schools had obliged his guardian to keep him entirely at home. The boy's absorbing passion was music. Of that his soul was full—of that he dreamt unceasingly. He would spend hours in the music-room at Renonçœur pouring out the fancies that filled his brain, wedding the strangest and subtlest of harmonies into that one perfect whole of beauty and of power which calls on music for its sole interpreter; proving the strength and force of his gifts by every trifle that he penned, yet withheld from public hearing for very diffidence and fear.

He worshipped music with mingled awe and rapture—uncertain of his own powers, yet conscious of a strength possessing him and leading him on to dare the wildest difficulties of his art. Longing for praise, yet dreading discouragement, timid and fearful of his own strength, yet feeling his heart thrill with divine ideals, and tremble with ecstatic joy as slowly and surely dawned upon him the almost certain conviction of his own genius. There was a story for him in the songs of the birds, in the waving branches of the trees, in the brown brook's laughing babble, as it chattered over the stones and kissed the blue forget-me-nots that bordered it. There was a history for him in the opening blossoms, in the tender buds with the dews shut in their virgin hearts, in the golden hues of the corn fields, in the flaming scarlet poppies, in the rich, sweet fragrance of the laden vines. Everything in Nature touched him and appealed to him,

for Art is no Art when it cannot bow the heart it rules, to love and reverence that one great Teacher.

Albert had never left Renonçeux ; its familiar beauty was dear and sacred to him as the only name he had ever known, and neither his guardian's nor Raoul's persuasion could ever induce him to accompany them on any of their visits to Paris. "He was happier at the château," he always said, and when they found he was really in earnest they let him please himself in the matter, and ceased to wonder at, or argue about his strange fancy.

So years had drifted quietly along ; then suddenly came a change in Renonçeux, for which neither Raoul nor Albert Hoffmann was prepared. The old Count de Verdreuil, after being twenty years a widower, suddenly married again ; a woman, too, whose extreme youth and marvellous beauty were apparently her sole attractions, for no satisfactory account of her birth or antecedents was ever received by the world. Society shrugged its shoulders and wondered and whispered many things about the new Countess of Renonçeux, but to no one did the news of this marriage give such grief and anger as to the proud and haughty Raoul de Verdreuil. He was absent at the time, but came hurrying home with swiftest speed at the first news of his father's marriage.

What passed between them no one ever knew ; no whisper of the nature of that interview ever escaped one or other, but that it had been a terrible and agitating one was plainly seen. Raoul left the château immediately afterwards, ostensibly on business of political importance, but Albert, who received his hurried farewell, saw there was some strange and forcible reason for this hasty departure.

"God bless you, my friend," he had whispered in hoarse and uncertain accents, "I am not coming back for another year ; it is best so. Look after my father for me, and don't let him believe ill of me !"

Then he was gone, and Albert Hoffmann in no small wonder and surprise was left to puzzle over this mysterious conduct on the part of his friend. At first he thought it must arise from jealousy. He had loved his father so deeply that he could not bear any one to step between him and his father's love and confidence. "Yes, that must be the reason," thought Albert to himself, "and perhaps in time when the first pain and jealousy wears off they will be reconciled, and as good friends as ever."

He did not know that men once estranged by a woman's influence can never again be quite the same. The world has proved *that* over and over again.

A year passed, and then news reached the château that the

young count was coming back to Renonçœur once more, and great joy filled Albert's heart at the news. There had been changes innumerable since the installation of the new countess. The reception-rooms had been altered and redecorated to suit her taste, the gardens laid out in improved style and on improved system, but she had sense enough to see that the antique and faultless beauty of the château itself could be in no way improved by modern art, and so she suffered it to remain with the severe and time-worn character of its architecture untouched and undisturbed. But she filled it with guests. She made the most of her first Parisian season, and having conquered coldness and smiled down distrust, was pronounced by the World of Fashion to be a success in her way. She was too beautiful, too bewitching, too full of life, and joy, and vitality herself to mingle in society and not captivate it; and when, for the first time since her marriage, she threw open the long-closed portals of Renonçœur to the *élite* of the world of fashion, her invitations were eagerly accepted, and people affected to forget they had ever styled the lovely Blanche de Verdreuil "a designing adventuress."

But to return to the trio on the terrace this bright spring morning. Albert Hoffmann came eagerly up to his friend, and seemed longing yet hesitating to make some request to him which the presence of Gaston Legard interfered with. Raoul's quick eyes read the restraint in his manner immediately, and helped him out of it.

"Excuse me now, Legard," he said, as they reached the broad flight of steps leading to the entrance; "I am going to the music-gallery till breakfast time. I promised Albert to hear and see all he has been doing during my absence. Oh! there comes Beaumarchais; he will be delighted to have a chat with you, I'm sure;" and nodding gaily in the direction of the gentleman in question, who was sauntering along with a cigar in his mouth, Raoul linked his arm carelessly in that of Albert Hoffmann's, and entered the château with him.

CHAPTER II.

MAY AND DECEMBER.

“There was an aged monarch;
 His heart was sad; his head was grey;
 This poor and aged monarch
 A young wife married one day.”

Heine.

“WHAT was it you wanted, Albert?” Raoul de Verdreuil asked this question as he stood in the music-room beside his friend.

“Nothing very particular, Raoul, only—” and the boyish face flushed suddenly with shame, and pride, and pleasure, “only I have written an opera at last. It is quite finished now, and I thought if you would not mind asking the countess for me, that we might have it performed here at Renonçeux. It is only in three acts, and we could do without scenery even, or get it from Paris. You know the theatre she has had built would do admirably, and she sings so well and acts so well herself that I am sure we could manage it. I want to hear how it sounds. If it pleases me I might get it done in Paris afterwards; don’t you think so, Raoul?”

“Why, how ambitious you have become, all of a sudden,” laughed his friend, gazing fondly down at the flushed, eager face, as he spoke. “A year ago we could hardly get you to acknowledge even what you had composed, and now you want to challenge public opinion on it. What has created such a change in that bashful mind of yours?”

“Please don’t laugh at me, Raoul,” pleaded the sweet, boyish voice; “I am in earnest about this, but I don’t like to ask the countess myself; she is very kind and sympathetic, and often comes here and makes me play to her, but I have not courage to proffer this request for all that. Will you do it?”

“If you wish it, yes,” said Raoul, his face darkening slightly as he spoke, as though the mission entrusted to him was not an agreeable one. “But I would much rather not. The Countess de Verdreuil and myself are not the best of friends, and I scarcely think a request of mine will carry much weight. However, I will try my best. You know there is little or nothing I can refuse you!”

“Indeed, you are only too good to me always, Raoul,” said Albert Hoffmann earnestly; “but tell me why are you so averse to the countess? she seems so interested in you, she talks so much about you, and yet you are so cold and indifferent, and appear to me to dislike her so much. Why is it, Raoul? Did

you know her before she married your father? Is there any real reason for your antipathy?"

"Those are questions I do not care to answer," said Raoul de Verdreuil coldly. "I did know the countess before she married, and that knowledge was sufficient to make me feel certain she was no fit wife for my father. He married her in a moment of deepest infatuation, and when I found the step was irrevocably taken I knew it was no use to rake up the bitterness of the past. But this I know, in Blanche de Verdreuil's life there is a *secret*, and the women of our race have ever brought unsullied hearts and natures to the lords of Renongeux. I said some such words as these to my father when I first heard of his strange and sudden marriage, and the result was that we came about as near to quarrelling irrevocably as ever two men, fiery, and proud, and self-willed, could come. I have not forgiven yet the woman who came between me and my father's love; the woman who first caused us to part in anger. True, we are reconciled again, but there is a restraint between us now. The old perfect confidence has given place to reserve. The first seeds of estrangement have been sown, and the harvest may be a plentiful one for aught I know. Women are born mischief-makers I verily believe."

A look of distress crossed Albert Hoffmann's face as he listened to these words.

"I am so sorry, Raoul, for your sake," he said gently, "but perhaps you are mistaken about the countess. She is so gentle and winning, and your father is so devoted to her, that I cannot help thinking the step he has taken is for his own happiness. He looks ten years younger since he married."

"Yes, it is all very well now," said Raoul, turning to the window impatiently; "but will it last? That is the question arising constantly in my mind; the question I cannot answer."

"Let us *hope* it will last, Raoul," said the quiet voice of the boy artist who, living in his own world of dreams and fancies, could scarcely comprehend the vexed and troubled questions of grave duties, sterner truths, the whole wonderful and contradictory elements of human life around him.

"Now I fear I have made you melancholy, Albert," said Raoul de Verdreuil, after a moment's silence, during which his thoughts had not been pleasant ones, to judge from his face. "I forget sometimes what a veritable tyro you are in the ways of the world. Banish that grave face now, and go and play to me; your music will soothe me better than anything, and effectually drive away my ill-humour."

Albert obeyed immediately; his friend's slightest wish was ever law to him. In truth it was no common friendship that bound these two apparently dissimilar characters; for the timid,

trustful, clinging nature of Albert Hoffmann needed the support and sympathy of a stronger nature, and had found it in Raoul de Verdreuil, and by force of that very contrast which so often marks the friendship of men and women, so in like manner, the firm, self-reliant, and proud heart of the one found a strange peace and content in the innocent love and inalienable devotion of the other. Raoul de Verdreuil was Albert's *beau idéal* of manly perfection. His very coldness and hauteur, his steadfast will, his unrestrained ambitions, and his pride of race and heritage were all virtues in the eyes of his friend; for to him he was never cold; never negligent; never proud. The most perfect confidence and sympathy existed between them; the sympathy of mutual comprehension, of exhaustless tenderness, of boundless trust; and though their friendship was not one that proclaimed itself to all eyes and ears as women's friendships so often do, yet it lived in their hearts and spoke in their lives, and was to each a sure and living reality that needed few words, that was rather felt than seen.

Obedient to Raoul's wish Albert Hoffmann turned now to the organ, and the melody of his own creation rolled out in waves of richest sound in the stillness of the early day. His friend stood silent beside him, listening to the deep-drawn, melodious chords, solemn as a cathedral chant, tender as a dream of youth, pure as the inspiration of a poet. The lingering harmonies grew sadder and more plaintive; the artist gave the rein to fancy, and let his hands interpret his thoughts as they would, and Raoul's eyes rested musingly and regretfully on the player.

The light from the stained glass windows cast strange shadows on the oaken floor, and fell across the ivory keys of the organ. Now and then a lingering sunbeam touched the bent head and loose, golden curls of the young artist, and still he played on and on, forgetful of all other presence; while the thoughtful beauty of his face grew rapt and bright, and the dreamful, far-off look in his eyes made Raoul's heart ache with strange and sudden pain. It seemed as if the unearthly beauty of the boy's young face struck him with fear and foreboding in that moment. So might the angels look in the courts of glory above, but so does never a human face look unless the seal of another Life is set upon its beauty.

An hour later Raoul de Verdreuil was seated in the breakfast-room of the château. The room was filled with guests; the table glittered with crystal and silver, and the sunlight sparkled on rare fruits and costly dainties, on dishes and wines that would have tempted even the most *exigéant* of epicures.

Through the open windows the scents of the rose-gardens below stole in with soft and subtle odours and golden rays of

light flitted ever and anon through the lace and azure hangings, to rest on women's faces, and linger on tresses sunny as the summer sunshine itself.

There was one woman there whose beauty was so rare and perfect that it made her shine out among the groups around as something too exquisite for rivalry. She was *Blanche*, Countess de Verdreuil, wife of the handsome, white-haired man beside her, who bore his threescore years so lightly and gracefully still. He and Raoul were very like each other—the same dark, haughty face reminding one of Vandyck's portraits, the same grave, proud eyes, and broad, thoughtful brow had descended from father to son. Both were eminently handsome men, worthy of the race from which they sprung; the race whose boast had ever been, "Their women were always lovely, their men always great."

The old count's infatuation for his young wife had become a byword among his friends and acquaintances, and her loveliness was a potent spell sufficient in itself to account for the rapt and unalienable devotion she received. She was very fair—too fair to be of southern origin, with great lustrous eyes, and hair that seemed to have caught its hue from the sunlight and kept it evermore. Her lips were lovely; laughing, child-like, scarlet as carnation buds; lips that whether parted in smiles, or closed in gravity, were always full of charm.

In fact, *Blanche* de Verdreuil was that most enchanting, and dangerous creation—a perfectly beautiful woman. Figure, face—both were types of feminine loveliness, faultless in their way. If the perfect face was trained to each expression, if the eyes wanted depth and sincerity, if the lovely, child-like lips wore that seemingly innocent smile, a trifle too often for it to be quite genuine, none noticed it, save and except—Raoul de Verdreuil.

To him—a man well skilled in reading natures, to him who thinks men's hearts and passions are instruments for his skilful hands to play upon as he will—this woman's shallow, selfish nature bears the stain of that one vice he abhors,—deceit. He knows it, and *she* knows that he does; that to him her witcheries, and airy graces, and matchless coquetry, are all a sham. There is no ring of true metal in the base coins she proffers; artifice is her real charm; her beauty and her nature are alike, shallow and soulless. Perhaps of all the men who have been blinded by her charms and led captive by her coqueties, Raoul de Verdreuil is the only one who read her nature too thoroughly ever to be deceived by it. In the black gulf of years long past—years that *Blanche* de Verdreuil never thinks of now without a shudder as of some nameless fear—she learnt her own powerlessness to charm this one man to love or believe in her.

The secret of those years lies between them, unknown to any save themselves, and it is one destined to work terrible havoc in the time to come.

Raoul de Verdreuil was right when he told Albert Hoffmann of his fears for the future, since this fair, radiant creature had become the mistress of his home, but those fears would have been doubly terrible could he have foreseen what lay in this woman's power, or read the treachery of her heart.

With all her beauty, with all her witchery and grace, Blanche de Verdreuil is a woman who will prove a subtle antagonist, a dangerous foe.

She is relentless and vindictive; she has neither the generosity to forgive or forget the slightest offence against her own supreme beauty and self-love. She has her own schemes to work even now, and a storm is already hovering on the horizon of that home life at Renonçeux—a storm that will work a deadly, fearful havoc over more than one of its inmates when it bursts.

But there is no sign of it yet, no omen of its ruin, and fury, and despair on the radiant face of the lovely châtelaine of Renonçeux, in the adoring worship of her husband's eyes as they rest on her ever and always from amidst the many other beautiful women she rivals, as the sun outrivals the stars; in the grave, impassive features of Raoul de Verdreuil sitting there by Albert Hoffmann's side, with never a smile upon his lips at the gay jests and idle words that fall upon his ear. But he looks up suddenly at last as Blanche de Verdreuil's clear, sweet voice exclaims gaily,—

"A forest divinity, Monsieur Legard! Who can it be? I thought I knew most of the fair *paysannes* around, but I can call to remembrance none worthy of such an enthusiastic description as yours."

"Oh, Gaston is romancing as usual," said a beautiful brunette, Madame de Villeroi by name, and cousin to Gaston Legard. "He is always lighting upon some *rara avis*, you know, who generally proves the very reverse of what we were led to expect."

"I am not romancing in this instance, however," said Monsieur Legard. "Ask De Verdreuil if I am not right in what I said? Raoul, was not the maiden we frightened from her forest retreat this morning as lovely as any nymph of classic lore?"

"She was very beautiful, I allow," said Raoul coldly, "but we had so little time to judge that I could not undertake to catalogue her charms as you have done!"

"There! did I not say he was romancing?" cried Madame de Villeroi, flashing her beautiful eyes triumphantly on her cousin's face. "How could you tell what she was like, Gaston, when

Monsieur de Verdreuil, who had the same time and opportunity for judging, declares his inability to do so. Was she fair or dark, Monsieur de Verdreuil?"

"I really cannot say," said Raoul, with a faint smile. "Fair, I *think*."

"Wrong!" exclaimed Gaston Legard; "she was dark; at least her hair looked like a mixture of bronze and gold in the sunlight, but her eyes were dark—dark as night. What is the use of asking De Verdreuil about a woman, he never knows what they're like. I suppose he would describe Madame la Comtesse as dark, if any one asked him. I never saw any one so ignorant and so indifferent on all matters appertaining to your adorable sex, madame" (with a slight bow to the Countess de Verdreuil), "as Raoul is. But, as I told him this morning, it will be all the worse for him one day."

A general laugh followed this remark. Raoul de Verdreuil's coldness and indifference towards women were, indeed, proverbial, and many a beautiful and, as she deemed, irresistible member of the *beau sexe* had used all her powers of fascination in vain to chain him to her side—to win something warmer than that calm, perfect courtesy which never changed, and was as faultless as it was cold.

No wonder women called him heartless, for no loveliness had ever charmed him to warmth and passion; no eyes lulled him to forgetfulness of his own aims, his own ambitions; no lips wooed him to the brief delirium of love. His indifference was borne of real, not pretended coldness; was no cynical affectation of disdain, but simply the very thing it appeared. Love was to him an empty sound—a meaningless jest; a passion, that lived in men's words—not ruled their hearts; a name that he greeted with that superb disdain which only strong natures feel for the weakness of their fellow-men.

He smiled at those words of Gaston Legard's—a smile, that illuminated his dark, haughty features, without softening or warming their passionless repose.

"All the worse for me *one* day," he answered, echoing Legard's last words. "By the time that indefinite period arrives, Gaston, I hope I shall be able to combat its dangers. I am undergoing my novitiate under good tuition."

"Indeed, whose is that?" asked his friend eagerly. "Didn't you, just this morning, declare that you were never in love in your life, and never wished to be, and—"

"Oh hush, pray!" interrupted Raoul, laughing. "Don't betray my confidence so rashly; a nice fellow you are to be Father Confessor, I must say. What I told you though is quite true, and if you want to know the secret of my invincibility, as you call it,

it lies in disbelief and indifference—two potent charms, are they not, madame?"

The latter portion of his sentence had been spoken so low that only Blanche de Verdreuil heard it. She looked hastily up at the young count's face, but meeting only that look of quiet amusement in his eyes, turned hastily away, and said, as if to hide her momentary embarrassment, "I think I must try and find out who this wonderful beauty is."

"For what purpose?" asked Raoul de Verdreuil suddenly. "Let her rest in her own sphere, madame, and keep that greatest of all earth's blessings, which the poor alone seem able to retain—content."

"Don't get epigrammatic, for goodness sake, Raoul," laughed Gaston Legard; "there's a season for all things you know, and none of us want to *think* seriously so early in the morning, I'm quite sure. By the way, Madame," he continued, turning to Blanche de Verdreuil, "did you not propose we should ride to the ruined abbey of St. Marguerite this morning? I think it is time the horses were ordered, if we mean to do it."

"Certainly," said the countess, looking intensely relieved at the change of subject. "Raoul, will you give the orders while we make our toilettes? I suppose you won't care to join us."

"Why not?" he said, in his most negligent, indifferent tone. "If one is bound to be idle, you know, one may as well be idle in company, and as I am taking a holiday from work I may as well take my fill of pleasure. What horse shall I order for you, madame, "La Belle Etoile?"

"No. I shall ride Estelle!" said the countess, rising from her seat.

"My dear Blanche," interposed her husband, "pray don't ride that chestnut again. It makes me quite nervous to think of your attempting it; remember the last time, and how nearly she threw you."

"Oh! I am not afraid," was the laughing answer. "There are few horses I cannot master if I choose."

"It will be great folly for you to attempt it, I think," said Raoul de Verdreuil quietly. "Estelle is not fit for a lady to ride. She is the wildest mare in the stables."

"Nevertheless, I *mean* to ride her," was the answer, given haughtily and coldly, while the flush deepened on the delicate cheek of Blanche de Verdrenil; and without another word she swept out of the room, with the graceful, swaying step so peculiarly her own. In vain her husband followed to entreat her to change her determination, she was firm and resolute, and declared her complete ability to master any horse she chose to ride, and the Count de Verdreuil, finding all remonstrance use-

less, could only beseech his son, who was a skilful and admirable horseman, to keep near the wilful beauty, and look after Estelle if she appeared inclined to show any mischief.

The mission seemed by no means a pleasant one to Raoul, for his face looked darker and graver than ever as he sauntered up and down the terrace waiting for the horses to appear.

"Are you coming, Albert?" he asked, stopping before the window of the library, and seeing his friend there watching him.

"No. I don't care for riding, you know, and besides I have some work to finish. The morning is the only time I can find now, since we are so gay at Renouveau."

"But, my dear boy," said Raoul gently, "you work too hard, it seems to me. You are much too pale and thin for my liking. Do leave off composing for once, and come for a long ride. It will do you all the good in the world, and give you fresh inspiration too."

Albert Hoffman shook his head with a faint smile of disbelief.

"Don't tempt me, Raoul," he answered. "I know what I have to do, and I must do it. Life is short enough for art as it is. I do not care to waste an unnecessary moment. Ah! here come the riders. Raoul," he whispered, leaning forward so as to be nearer his friend, "you won't forget what I asked you, will you? about the opera, you know."

"I shall not forget," said Raoul quietly, his eyes wandering to the exquisite figure of Blanche de Verdreuil, as she came slowly towards them, in the full radiance of the sunlight. "Good-bye, *mon cher*, and don't overwork yourself, if only to please *me*."

The boyish face flushed all over with pleasure at those words.

"Rest assured of that," he said earnestly. Then he retreated from the window, and Raoul de Verdreuil turned slowly away to meet the countess.

"The horses are here, madame," he said, as he joined her. "Shall I assist you?"

"If you will," she answered, glancing at him in some surprise; his offers of courtesy were not very frequent. "But I thought you disapproved too much of my resolution to further or assist it in any way?"

"I *do* disapprove of it," said Raoul coldly, "but for all that I am going to help you in your evident determination to break your neck. As I cannot defeat your purpose, I may as well aid you in the first step towards it."

"What a pleasant speech!" laughed the countess merrily. "Really, monsieur, you must study the art of making yourself disagreeable, I think. That speech of yours at the breakfast table has mortally offended all the ladies here—they will never forgive it."

"I am very sorry, I am sure ; I know by experience that *truth* is the one thing tabooed in polite circles. Bring that with you and you can count your enemies by the score immediately. I have unfortunately not yet managed to do without that unpleasant companion who has such an awkward knack of intruding when not desirable. Hence my reputation as a disagreeable man."

"A *diplomat* and truthful !" exclaimed Blanche, shrugging her shoulders with a gesture of incredulity. "Nay, monsieur ; that is an anomaly I cannot believe in. Say rather, you make truth serve your purpose only when it suits you to hurt other people's feelings. Ah ! here is Estelle. Now mount me, please. It is time we were off, for it is a long ride to St. Marguerite's Abbey."

CHAPTER III.

WHAT "HAS BEEN."

"She look'd so lovely as she sway'd
The rein with dainty finger tips.
A man had given all other bliss
And all his worldly wealth for this—
To waste his whole heart in one kiss
Upon her perfect lips."

Tennyson.

OVER the mosses of the forest path Raoul de Verdreuil rode by the side of the Countess of Renonceux. Through the leafy boughs stray sunbeams fell across her face, from which all the smiles and mirth had died away, leaving it grave, and anxious, and disturbed. The riding party had fallen into pairs as if by one consent, and none had disputed Raoul's claim as he took his place by Blanche de Verdreuil's side.

For some moments a total silence reigned between them, but the gloom deepened in Raoul's eyes, and the firm, grave lips were compressed as if with some determination—not pleasant, but still unalterable.

One swift glance from Blanche de Verdreuil's eyes read the expression of his whole face in an instant, and her cheek paled slightly as if with some fear she only breathed to her own heart. She knew that of all men she had met in the world, and with whom she had played at love-making in the ordinary course of events, none would have ridden by her side as Raoul did now, neither heeding nor admiring the dazzling beauty whose power

she had long deemed invincible ; neither lifting his eyes to meet her own, nor seeking to awaken her interest with words and courteous speech.

Blanche de Verdreuil was a thorough coquette, a woman who had studied the weakness, the foibles, the passions of men so well that she could adapt herself to each nature it pleased her to conquer. There was no womanly charm, no feminine grace she could not counterfeit most perfectly. The sweet voice could thrill, and sink to tenderest sympathy. The beautiful eyes could darken with earnest feelings, or sparkle with brightest mirth, or veil themselves beneath their fringing lashes to suit every sentiment and feeling she chose to simulate. She had a passionate belief in, and supreme love for, herself. She loved to think herself invincible ; to rouse passions in others she could never feel, but which were the sole gratification her vanity craved, the insignia of her sovereignty—the very crown and sceptre of her kingdom.

But in one instance her arts had been useless because they *were* arts. Her schemes had been faulty, her beauty valueless ; nay more, those schemes had recoiled on her own head, and inasmuch as they had been powerless to win the love for which she longed, had yet taught her the weakness of her own heart, which, waking at last from its selfish slumbers, had thrilled and burned with the reckless, unavailing passion she had so often kindled in the hearts of others.

In the hour that taught her one man's power, Blanche de Verdreuil first learned the full extent of woman's weakness ; learnt it too when reckless of consequences, mad with despair, she had forgotten all womanly scruples, all womanly shame, and cast down her heart at the feet of a man who had not spurned, but simply and coldly declined the gift ; had scarcely even cared to veil from her eyes the amused scorn, the half-concealed contempt he felt for the reckless self-betrayal, which coming from a woman was, in his eyes, inexcusable.

And so taking her wounded pride, her broken vanity, her aching undisciplined heart back to herself again, Blanche de Verdreuil had vowed that her life should be spent henceforth for one purpose, dedicated to one end—revenge ; and fate playing into her hands, as it often does play into the hands of those who give themselves over to evil, sent across her path the father of the very man who had scorned and rejected her. Her decision was soon made. Her victim in this instance brought an old man's adoring faith and passionate belief, and boundless love to this beautiful woman's feet, and became her slave as blindly, as willingly, as she could have wished. All she told him as to herself, her life, her antecedents, he never questioned, never

doubted. His first marriage had been of ambition, not of love ; and twenty years of a wifeless, solitary life had left his heart still fresh and young despite his years. The love this woman kindled there burnt up like a devouring flame all thoughts of prudence, all demands of rank and honour. His passion blinded him, and its overmastering power swept all doubts and scruples away with swift increasing force. He married her and brought her to his home ; that home where all the women had been noble, and pure, and true, where no stain of dishonour rested even amidst reckless passions, and faithful loves, and terrible temptations ; brought her there to worship, and adore, and believe in her from that day forward, till the faithful, loyal heart she had won so securely had ceased to beat for life and love ; had gone to learn in another world the secret she had guarded so well in this.

"You are very silent this morning, madame," said Raoul de Verdreuil at last, as he glanced at the beautiful face beside him.

"I might say the same of you," answered Blanche with a faint, nervous laugh. "May I ask to what I owe the unusual honour of your escort?"

"I promised my father to look after you," was the reply given coldly and indifferently. "He does not consider Estelle trustworthy."

Blanche de Verdreuil's lips curled somewhat scornfully.

"Any one else could perform that service equally well," she said ; "but since I have the unusual pleasure of your company, Monsieur de Verdreuil, permit me to ask if you have altered the determination you expressed on the occasion of your last visit to Renonçeux ?

Raoul's face grew dark with anger at these words.

"I have not altered it. I repeat what I said then ; the position you have gained here has been gained by treachery and deceit. For my father's sake I tolerate your presence and respect the secret of your real antecedents ; but Renonçeux can no longer be my home while shared by you."

The hot blood dyed Blanche de Verdreuil's face as she listened.

"You still keep your old art of wounding, to perfection" she said passionately. "Ah, monsieur, the world speaks truly when it says you have neither pity nor love, nor even compassion for either man or woman. You have come to Renonçeux for one purpose only—to wound and torture me. I hear it in your words, I read it in your looks ; it sounds in the veiled meaning, the cruel satire of every speech I hear from your lips !"

"Don't get excited, pray. You are frightening Estelle," interrupted the cool, tranquil voice of Raoul. "My object in coming to Renonçeux really does not deserve such abuse

as you give it. I never war with women ; I don't consider they are worth the trouble ; but all the same, madame, *Blanche Lecroix* has no title to her present position, and she knows it ; and it is small wonder that I—knowing it also—should scarce feel courteously disposed towards one so unworthy of the name and place of my dead mother."

"Oh, hush !" cried *Blanche*, her very lips growing white at his words. "For pity's sake forget that name, and all belonging to that time. The past is over and done with, how can it benefit you to rake up its memories again ? You tried it once when you appealed to your father to annul our marriage ; you know his answer ; and I," she added, slowly and softly, "know *my* power. You had better let it be peace between us, monsieur."

He laughed again : a chill, merciless laugh which made her shiver at the sound.

"Do you really suppose," he said quietly, "that I shall enter into any compact with *you* ? That, knowing what I know, suspecting what I do, I fear to measure weapons with you, or dread your influence, great as it may appear at present ? You know very little of me, madame, to imagine such a thing. I am not given to softness or weakness as a rule, but what little I possess can never plead your cause, should it ever be in my power to make you answer for the shame and loathing which has filled my heart ever since I knew *who* it was my father had chosen as his wife. And now——" he paused a moment as if to curb the anger raging in his heart,—"now even, I might excuse you, did I think you really cherished and valued that wealth of love, that adoring trust, that boundless faith lavished upon you ; could I think that any pure or womanly motive had prompted your marriage with my father. But I know it is not so. I know that ambition, vanity, selfishness, perchance motives even worse, alone influenced your choice ; and looking at the Future by the light of the Past, I feel my heart ache with forebodings. I know that for once my home and race are in danger of what has never yet darkened the one, or sullied the other—dishonour !"

Blanche de Verdreuil raised her head with proud contempt, and her lip curled with intense scorn.

"I wonder you dare say such words to me," she said, her voice trembling with passion. "Were you so blameless in those days we know of, monsieur ? Has the white flower of virtue been so entirely yours, that you should blame a woman for succumbing to such a temptation as your father's love was to me ? You know what my life *was*, you say ; is it then so wonderful that I should welcome any change, especially a change that promised to raise me from the degradation, the misery, the despair of such

a life? Why should I have raised barriers in the very face of the peace and safety I had craved for so long? Why——”

“Why, in short, should you have been for once honest and unselfish,” interrupted Raoul: “two virtues rarely found in women. No, I suppose it was not to be expected of you, madame. Loyalty and courage are not feminine qualities, at least as far as my experience goes; you were only true to the instincts of your sex after all. You thought it no shame to hide the sins and follies of the past behind the safe and sheltering love of a man’s great trusting heart, beneath the honour of his name, the social distinction of his rank and wealth; and he—he believes you disinterested in your choice. Truly, the world may well say ‘Love is blind;’ a surer instance than this was never found of the truth of that proverb.”

“How you must hate me!” she cried passionately, as the last of those cold, merciless words fell on her ear. “Oh, Raoul! whose fault is it that I made this choice? who——”

“I think you had better not say any more,” he interrupted, with a sudden flush upon his dark, grave face, a strange light in his eyes, as they rested on the beautiful, agitated woman before him. “There are some things a man cannot well hear, even from a woman; and you know,” he added more gently, “the fault was not mine, say what you will; even if it were, I hold to my old creed; a woman who marries without love, who brings to her husband a heart whose histories are sealed from his knowledge, is a woman not worthy of his love, his home, his confidence.”

“What an old-world, impossible creed that is!” laughed Blanche de Verdreuil scoffingly; “look at the society around you, the world you live in, and ask is such a doctrine possible. Does it exist in one marriage you have witnessed? The very social laws of France are against it.”

“That may be,” was the quiet answer. “I know it sounds absurd and impossible to women, because it would so materially affect their *interests*. I believe that goes before everything with them, does it not? Hearts are a mere secondary consideration.”

“Not always,” she said in the same tone; “but if you are going to wait till you find a woman who comes up to the standard you have described, I fear you will never find one worthy the inestimable honour of becoming your wife.”

“Very probable, indeed. But yet there are such women in the world. You look incredulous. Well, it is only natural you should; I suppose you cannot understand the type of womanhood from among whom I might seek, yes, and *find* one capable of a disinterested marriage.”

She flushed hotly at the speech. She knew its severity was well merited.

"You are a model of courtesy, I must say. I wonder all women—"

"Don't hate me?" he questioned as she hesitated. "Well, so do I sometimes. But it matters little whether they do or not. Take care, madame!" he cried, as the countess's horse suddenly swerved and reared, "Estelle is getting decidedly impatient of this quiet pace."

"And so am I," exclaimed Blanche de Verdreuil, with a bright, defiant smile. "I want a good stretching galop to shake off the effects of our conversation."

"You should have had a curb for that mare," continued Raoul, somewhat uneasily. "I don't like her looks at all."

"*Chut!*" cried Blanche lightly. "There is nothing to fear from her. I am not afraid. There was never a horse yet I feared to mount. Now, monsieur, I shall join the others. Our *tête-à-tête* has lasted long enough. I don't suppose either of us will regret its termination. You are sure," she continued more earnestly, as she reined in her horse for a moment, despite its impatience, "you are sure it is to be war—not peace? I will never ask it again after to-day, Raoul."

As she spoke his name she looked up at his face with real anxiety shadowing her eyes; but his own never softened, even as they took in the living, exquisite loveliness of this woman he counted as a foe.

"Peace between us," he said bitterly. "Is it possible? Is my memory of the past too faithful when I say I cannot promise it? I will make no compact with—you."

Her face blanched beneath the quiet scorn of his words, but her eyes gleamed with a fierce, unsparing hate under the long, sweeping fringe of their lashes, and her mouth compressed tightly as if to keep back the fury of her unspoken wrath.

"Be it so," she said at length, her voice chill and passionless as his own! "Yours is the decision; yours be also the result. Only remember—I never *spare*."

Ere he could speak, she raised her whip, and struck the chestnut impatiently with it, forgetful of the warnings she had received. The animal started, reared, then dashed suddenly forward; the rider was unprepared for the sudden demand upon her nerve and coolness, and in another instant Estelle was tearing along the narrow road with the bit between her teeth, totally unmanageable.

CHAPTER IV

THERE IS SWEET MUSIC HERE.

"There is sweet music here that softer falls
Than petals from blown roses on the grass."

Tennyson.

THE notes of the organ were pealing through the music-gallery at Renonçeux.

From the gardens below the faint, soft breeze, laden with fragrance, swept softly in at the open window. All the drowsy, sunlit silence was full of odours of flowers. The terraces were deserted, and the rose aisles were left to the bees and butterflies in the stillness and hush of the hot noontide hour.

The music thrilled and quivered in the silence, as if it were some living voice tremulous with passion, weighted with joy akin to pain in its depth, and fervour, and happiness. It haunted the stillness without and within; it fell on the ear of a girl lingering in the picture-gallery beyond those heavy velvet *portières*; a girl standing awed, entranced, with parted lips and great, dark, changing eyes, and a faint scarlet bloom on her cheeks that came and went with the breathless agitation of the moment. Involuntarily she moved nearer and nearer those doors whence came the magic of that wonderful melody. Stirred and moved but by one impulse—to be nearer it.

A light touch and the doors opened, and she stood within the shadowy room, trembling at her own temerity, yet incapable of retreat. The light from the stained glass windows fell on the gilded pipes of the organ, and on the head of the player whose back was towards her, and who was quite unconscious of her presence. The great melodious waves of sound filled the room with their wonderful power, and he, wrapped in the vague, enchanting dreams that music always brought him, never heeded the shadow that fell across the sunlight, the soft footstep crossing the oaken floor—never thought for a moment that he was not alone.

The rich harmonies suddenly grew soft and subdued; a few weird, solemn minor chords changed the whole character of the music. No longer glad and triumphant, but sweet, and sad, and mournful, it thrilled out its tender melody; and the face of the player was very grave, and the face of the listener very pale. The last notes died away in the stillness, the white, fragile hands left the keys, and then—suddenly—a deep-drawn sigh that was almost a sob fell on his ear, and turning hastily round he saw a figure leaning against the embrasure of one of the windows—a

woman's figure half revealed, half indistinct in the shadows where she lingered so timidly. When she saw she was observed she came hurriedly forward.

"You will think me very bold, monsieur," she said, blushing deeply; "I had no right to intrude here; but I was in the gallery adjoining, and I heard you playing. I listened till I could not resist coming in here. It is so long since I heard music like yours. It took me back to the old days, and the old life—and I forgot all else, monsieur." Her voice seemed to Albert Hoffmann as the low chime of silver bells. The faint foreign accent lingering in its tones was inexpressibly charming.

"Do not apologize any more, mademoiselle," he said, wondering who this girl could be, with her wonderful beauty, her graceful speech, her shy, half-bashful air. "I am sure you were perfectly welcome to listen as long as you pleased. Are you?" he hesitated slightly—"are you staying at the château?"

She looked at him with great, astonished eyes, as if she thought he spoke in mockery.

"I, monsieur?" she exclaimed, glancing involuntarily down at her shabby garments, and the thick dusty boots covering her dainty feet; "no; how could any one in my station be a guest at Renonçeux? I only came over with gran'mère to-day, and while she stayed to chat with her nephew, the *chef de cuisine* here, the housekeeper gave me leave to look at the pictures, as all the visitors were away. That is how I heard you playing, monsieur!"

"Are you very fond of music then?" inquired Albert, thinking what a picture she made, with the crimson and violet hues of the stained glass weaving out a fanciful robe for her graceful figure, and the rippling masses of her half-bright, half-dusk hair glistening in the rays of the sunlight.

"I love it," she said quietly, though her eyes shone and flashed with a wonderful eager light. "I have always loved it since my childhood."

"I wonder who she can be," thought Albert, more and more puzzled every moment, and feeling half embarrassed by her presence. He was always shy with women.

"Is this the first time you have come to Renonçeux?" he said presently.

"Yes," she answered; "I have not lived here long. My home is in that little cottage just off the high road and beyond the wood. I live there with Gran'mère Beauvoir."

"Have you no parents of your own, then?"

"No," she said sadly. "Gran'mère has adopted me, but I have no claim upon her except my friendlessness."

She ceased abruptly, and Albert longed to hear again that

rich, sweet voice, whose music lingered in his heart like a sense of new-born joy.

Yet he scarcely liked to question her about herself. She seemed at once so shy, so proud, so full of womanly dignity and girlish frankness.

The poverty and coarseness of her dress only seemed to display the grace of her figure to fuller advantage. She had the tall, slender, voluptuous form of the south; the dreamy, passionate eyes; the soft, mournful smile, the broad, thoughtful brow we see in an Italian face; but the fairness of the skin betrayed some other origin also, and gave a rarer charm to the dark eyes, the dusky gold-flecked hair.

"You are not French, mademoiselle, I see," said Albert, presently; "your accent betrays that."

"Oh, no," she answered quickly; "Italy is my birthplace. But it would be hard to decide what I am," she continued, with a faint smile. "My father was French, I believe, my mother of English extraction, though born in Italy like myself. It is little enough I know about either of them."

"Are they not living now?" said Albert, so gently, so sympathizingly, that it robbed the question of anything like curiosity.

"No," she said sadly; "my mother died shortly after I was born; my father I know nothing of."

Albert was silent.

Those few words spoke a whole history; it might be of shame, it might be of error; but whichever it was, the pure dawning life of the young girl before him was shadowed by that nameless sorrow.

She vaguely understood its meaning; the simple history she had told the young artist was the only history she knew; all else had been kept from her by the love and watchfulness of the only friend she possessed in the world, the old faithful peasant-woman, her foster-mother Manon Beauvoir; and the nameless, motherless child, had grown up to womanhood with the proud instincts, and the vague longings of a high-born, lofty nature, yet with only poverty and friendlessness for her portion, and the unproven error of her dead mother's past for her heritage.

"I lived in Italy for many years," she said presently. "In Bologna, in Pisa, in Florence. Gran'mère was very poor, but we managed to live comfortably: somehow one needs so little in Italy. I was very happy. I learnt all I could. Gran'mère managed that I should be educated, and I was always fond of reading; and the good sisters at the convent where she worked taught me as much as they could. But still I fear I am very ignorant."

"And your name?" asked Albert presently, as she paused.

"Vivienne St. Maurice. It was my mother's name. After her death, my father told gran'mère that he was going away for a few weeks on a journey; that she was to take charge of me until his return; and he left her money enough for all necessities during his absence. From that day he never returned. Gran'mère heard no more of him. Whether he is living or dead she does not know to this day. But pardon me, monsieur; I am wearying you with my foolish confidences."

"Indeed, no," said Albert eagerly, "I like to listen to you. I wish I could do anything to help you. Did your father leave no clue to his movements, give no hint of where he was going? Perhaps something may have happened to him, some evil, some accident. It is strange he should disappear so entirely."

The girl shook her head sorrowfully.

"I know no more," she answered. "Perhaps if any one great or influential had sought for him, or striven to trace his history, I might have gained some clue ere this, but gran'mère knew no one, and we had no friends to interest themselves about us; and so the years have passed, and I am a child no longer, and the life I lead seems against all the instincts of my nature; and yet, —what other can I hope for?"

The simple pathos of the words touched her listener's heart; their restrained pain, their wistful longings were so full of sadness. He turned from the appealing eyes, so child-like in their sorrow, so womanly in their gentle patience, their infinite regret.

This girl interested him strangely. Little as he had ever thought of women, there was something about her that charmed and touched him indescribably; she was so fair, so pure, so child-like; it seemed hard to think that one so young was already touched by life's suffering; already shadowed by the world's reproach.

Not caring to answer her last words he turned to the music-desk before him.

"Can you play?" he asked softly; "you seem fond of music?"

"I used to play the organ; not a grand one like this, monsieur, but I fear I have forgotten the little I learnt by this time."

"It is a pity your love has not been fostered and encouraged. Music is such a joy in itself, I think. Judging from your face, mademoiselle, I should say you appreciated it for its own sake. Am I right?"

"Indeed you are. I scarcely know why I love music so dearly. Perhaps because I was brought up in a land where it is inherent in almost every soul," she answered; "one hears it everywhere

in Italy. In the peasants' voices, in the muleteers' songs, in the great nobles' houses, in the cathedrals and churches, in the streets of the poor, in the palaces of the rich. When I was a little child of five years old I used to go to St. Eustache, a church in Florence. I would creep up to the organ-gallery and listen to the music and the singing for hours together. At last an old man noticed me, he was the organist there : a grave, gentle, kindly man, whose whole heart was full of music, whose whole life had been spent in service of his art. He taught me to play, and trained my voice, and let me come and sing when he practised his choir. I know most of the grand masses and all the beautiful chants they used to sing, by heart."

She paused, and then went on more sadly, with the pain of some wistful memory in her sweet young voice.

"From the time I left Italy I have had no opportunity to follow music or study it as I should wish. I sing to myself, for I can never forget what I have learnt ; but oh ! I miss the organ, and the dear old master who taught me all I know, all I shall ever know, I fear. Your playing, monsieur, was to me as a glimpse of my lost paradise again."

"You are very good to say so," he answered. "Do you know the mass I was playing?"

"Mozart's—the third, I think. Yes, I know it, monsieur. Shall I sing the 'Agnus Dei' to you?"

She asked the question as simply and naturally as if it was an ordinary request. There was no shyness, no hesitation on her face ; nothing but the glow and enthusiasm of an *artiste* for the art she revered.

"Do, pray !" said Albert eagerly ; "I should like to hear your voice."

She obeyed immediately. The first notes as they rang out through the vast gallery, rich, clear, impassioned, fairly startled Albert as he heard them.

Her voice was of rare and exquisite beauty, mournful, thrilling, yet so sweet withal that the young artist felt like one entranced by its beauty, spell-bound by its power. She sang the old Latin words with her pure Italian accent, her whole fervour of heart and soul thrown into their meaning, interpreting the whole divine truths of a master mind, as though its genius fired her own.

Albert listened in amazement. Music gave her the one charm that could sway his soul, and touch his nature—the one spell which made her beauty irresistible, and seemed to bring the divinity he had only seen in dreams and imagined in idyls, before him as a living presence. Never had he felt as he felt now, when he heard the tender sweetness of that perfect voice

floating sadly and faintly away with the last chords of the closing harmonies. His hands left the keys. His eyes, rapt, passionate, awe-struck, rested on her face.

"It was perfect—sublime! Who taught you to sing like *that*?"

"Nature, I suppose," she said, smiling a little at his enthusiasm. "Do I really sing well?"

"Sing well? Your voice is perfectly marvellous," cried Albert enthusiastically. "You have a gift great and glorious beyond all words. Friendless, nameless, obscure, with *that*. Why the world would give you eternal fame if it heard you!"

"Is that true?" she questioned breathlessly, as if unable to believe his praise, and all the hopes which sprang to life with its utterance.

"True, mademoiselle? Indeed it is; why should you doubt it? Are you so ignorant of your own powers?"

"I think so," she said, with a faint smile. "No one ever told me what you have done, monsieur. Gran'mère always said I was her nightingale, and my old master used to prophesy that my voice would be a grand one some day, but I never thought it might do for me what you say, monsieur,—give me fame, wealth, friends. Ah! I thought I would be always poor as I am now."

She lifted her eloquent eyes to his face with all a child's gratified vanity and gladness shining in their depths. That look startled Albert, and distressed him too. Had he been wise in telling her, her power? Was not the life he had spoken of attended by dangers hitherto unimagined by her in her dreaming childhood, her innocent faith? A child with the beauty of a woman, ignorant of peril, unconscious of harm, nameless and obscure, would not the world be full of danger to such a one?

Involuntarily he stretched out his hand and laid it on her own.

"Child," he said gently, "you are safer in your poverty; you are richer in your innocence and purity than ever the world can make you. Do not weary your young heart with futile wishes; with hopes that if realized, may, after all, fail in giving you content. The world, for all its allurements, is full of troubles and griefs that in your present life you need never know—of heartaches and miseries that now you cannot even imagine."

"I do not care for *that*," she answered, proudly drawing herself away from his touch. "I want to be great—famous—loved. At least, I should not be scorned as a peasant then."

He paused a moment, saddened by her words.

"You would not leave the friend who has sheltered and

protected you so long for the imaginary glories of the world, were the choice given you now—would you ?” he asked at length.

“Oh, no !” she exclaimed ; “nothing would tempt me to leave gran’mère ; she has been all in all to me ; she took me from my dead mother’s arms ; she tended, nursed, and sheltered me. She worked for me through all the years I was helpless. Oh no, monsieur ! I would never forsake her. Only if I have any gift, any talent as you said, why should I not use it for her in her old age as she has used her strength and given the labour of her hands for me ? Surely it is not wrong to wish to repay her if I can ?”

“Not wrong, certainly. But for the life that would give you fame, I doubt her counselling you to leave your present one. If she knows anything of the world she knows the perils of the stage.”

“But the great singers I have seen in Italy were always so happy and so rich,” cried the girl eagerly. “They always looked as if they had not a care or a grief in the world. And then to see them on the stage, so lovely, so graceful. The brilliant lights, the rapturous applause, the enthusiastic praises of vast crowds rewarding all their efforts ! Oh ! monsieur, a life like that must be paradise.”

“With the serpent’s sting in the roses—Yes. I was foolish to tell you of such a possibility as the life you name. I have made you discontented. Sing to me again and forget this grave conversation. Will you try this ?”

He drew a MSS., part of his own opera, from among a heap of music, and first playing the melody over for her to catch it, waited for her to sing. The girl hesitated, a little shy of beginning, but seeing his expectant look she complied with his wish, and the young artist heard his own aria performed faultlessly and correctly for the first time since it had left his pen. Although the music was new to the girl, her quick ear caught it immediately, and the sweet rich notes thrilled out once more, stirring the young artist’s heart with keen delight, with still greater wonder.

“Thank you,” he said simply, when she had ceased. “I had no idea my own music could be so exquisite as you have rendered it.”

“Is that *yours* ?” she asked, in astonishment. “Oh, monsieur, how beautiful ! That is for an opera, is it not ?”

“Yes,” he said, smiling at her surprised face. “My first attempt.”

“Then you write music, too, and you play so magnificently ! Ah, monsieur, what happiness you have given me to-day !”

“I hope you will come again,” he said quickly. “I shall always be glad to play to you—still more glad if you will sing to

me. A voice like yours is rare ; I could never tire of listening to it ; it seems hard it should be wasted in obscurity," he added musingly, as his eyes wandered again to the girl's fair, downcast face.

"And yet you first counselled that very obscurity as safety ; methinks you are changeable, monsieur," said Vivienne, smiling archly at him.

She had been puzzled and disappointed by his words. It seemed hardly fair that he should breathe a hope so exquisite in her ears one moment, to dash it to the ground the next. In her unconsciousness of all harm, her ignorance of all danger, the life of a stage singer, with its dazzling allurements, had seemed a perfect paradise of delight, promising untold bliss to her young heart. The world was a golden realm of joy, and hope, and gladness ; what could harm or hurt her there she wondered, and a grave shadow passed over the sunny fairness of her face as she thought of Albert's discouragement.

He noticed it quickly, and was angry with himself for his own inadvertent words, spoken on the impulse of the moment. For some minutes an embarrassed silence reigned between them both, while he hesitated to answer her last remark.

"Changeable am I ?" he said at length. "Indeed I am not. If a time ever comes when I can serve you I will do so, but I will not urge upon you a life which, dazzling and alluring as it is, carries great peril and sore temptations to one young, friendless, beautiful as you are. If you wish, however, I will speak to the countess about you. It may be in her power to do something for you or your gran'mère. You live just out of the wood, I think you said ; that cottage with the large pear-tree before it, I suppose."

"Yes, monsieur. It belonged to a sister of gran'mère's, and at her death her nephew, who is *chef de cuisine* at the château, as I told you before, bade gran'mère come and live there if she liked rent free. So we came to France then, and settled down at Renonçeux, and ——"

"Vivienne ! Vivienne !"

The name rang out through the adjacent gallery reminding the girl of the length of her absence and startling her by its suddenness.

"That is gran'mère calling," she said hurriedly. "Oh, how long I must have been away. A thousand thanks to you, monsieur, for all your kindness. Adieu !" and ere he could speak a word to detain her she fled swiftly away through the curtained doors, and left Albert Hoffmann alone once more.

Yet could he ever be alone again in that room, while her presence haunted it, and would so haunt it from this hour ?

The slow hours waned, the shadows grew deeper, weaving fantastic images on the oaken floor, and shadows of the future, stranger than any thrown by the lingering light and waning day were gathering and shaping themselves around the silent figure bending there over the closely written score, whose chief attraction now lay in the fact that *she* had sung it.

"Who can do it justice now?" he murmured, as he placed the *shee's* tenderly and carefully together. "It will never, never sound the same to me again."

And the girl whose face haunted him could think of nothing but his promise. Its glamour of hope was before her eyes, as she told the history of the past hour to gran'mère, who softly chided her for giving her confidence to a stranger, and trusting in his words with so little maidenly reserve. But the gentle rebuke was unheeded, for the girl's eyes were dazzled by the promised glory of a new life, and no warning could chill her fervent belief in Albert's promises.

As she passed on to her house (such a poor and humble home it was after the magnificence of the château of Renouveau) her heart seemed gay and light as a child's, sweet snatches of song rose to her lips, gay and glad, as those of the birds above her head; but her eyes for once seemed heedless of the beauty around her.

The old triumph had begun, the triumph of the world over the innocence and peace of an unstirred, dreaming heart. New hopes, new thoughts, new ambitions had sprung up to life within her. Would they be pure, unsullied, noble still? Would the tranquil rest and the innocent dreams be worth more than the glories her heart whispered of now?

Perchance they might, but being a woman the chances lay in favour of ambition—not of the rest of heart and content of mind which must be sacrificed to obtain it.

CHAPTER V

ANGER.

On and on over the narrow bridle-path, fleet as the wind, and mad with the wild, glad sense of freedom, the chesnut flew along. And pale and white her rider sat, grasping desperately at the reins which were now powerless to check the furious animal.

Her eyes were fixed on the road before her, the long, stretching, shelterless road into which the forest path opened; once that road was reached there was no danger. The horse

would tire in time of this tremendous pace ; it could not last, and she was not afraid of keeping her seat, even though the swift motion made her giddy, and the little hands clutching the reins so desperately were cut and bleeding with the strain.

But the path was narrow, and the great trees, with their wide-spreading branches, made it difficult to guide any horse even at a moderate pace. Again and again Blanche bent her head down to the very saddle-bow, to avoid being struck by some low branch ; her hat was carried away, her habit caught and torn, her breath came in low, quick gasps. Would the road never be reached ; would the speed never slacken ?

It was near now, stretching white and distinct before her in the bright glare of the blinding sunshine. They must reach it soon.

But the mare thought otherwise ; suddenly she swerved aside with a swift, sidelong movement. There was a crash, a fall, and her rider fell from the saddle, stunned by the blow of the huge, projecting branch which had struck her unprotected head. Fortunately her foot was not entangled in the stirrup, or a fearful fate might have been hers. As it was she lay motionless at the foot of the tree, while the chestnut freed from its burden dashed madly along, and was lost to sight in an instant.

The sight of the prostrate figure, with the long, loose trail of its golden hair streaming over the mossy ground, struck with a strange dread to Raoul de Verdreuil's heart as he came up to it at last. He checked his horse, and hastily fastening the bridle-rein to the nearest branch, approached the motionless woman.

He bent over her as she lay white and still on the dank, mossy roots of the tree. There seemed no breath or life in her. The beautiful face was like marble ; the smooth brow had one dark, terrible bruise on it, where the heavy branch had struck it. There was no flutter of life in the pulse, no throb or beat in the heart beneath the dark, closely-fitting riding-habit. Raoul felt alarmed. He scarcely knew what to do.

Involuntarily he loosed the bodice of her habit at the throat, and raising the beautiful head from the ground, rested it on his arm. Water there was none at hand he knew, but he fancied she was only stunned by the fall, and trusted to nature to bring her round.

In a moment or two he knew he was right, for he felt a faint, fluttering sigh breathe from the lips over which he bent ; then a quick, tremulous, shiver ran through her whole frame, and Blanche de Verdreuil's eyes opened on the grave, anxious face above. A faint blush flushed the marble whiteness of her skin as she tried to withdraw from his arm ; but her strength was not equal to the exertion, and her eyes closed again.

Raoul held a flask to her lips, which he drew from his riding-coat, and forced a few mouthfuls of its contents down her throat. It seemed as if the cordial revived her immediately, for her eyes opened again and fastened on Raoul's face with an eager, passionate glance, that even her weakness and her danger could not withhold.

"Are you much hurt?" he asked anxiously. "No, don't move yet, you may faint again. Rest quietly for a few moments, and then I will help you to rise."

She did not answer; the white-veined lids drooped over her beautiful eyes, and she leant silently against him. How beautiful she looked at that moment! Even Raoul, cold and indifferent as he was, felt that thought stealing through his heart, as the faint colour slowly warmed her face, and the rich bloom returned to her lips, and the heavy fragrant tresses of her loosened hair swept across his breast, on which her head rested so wearily and languidly.

Involuntarily the thought crossed him—"If the soul within was as perfect as the form, this woman would be irresistible indeed."

"I hope you are not injured, madame," he said presently. "I fear that fall was a terrible one at the speed you were going."

"I don't think I am much hurt," she answered faintly; "only bruised and shaken. I can't remember anything after the bough struck me. I only wonder how I managed to get free of the stirrup, and escape being dragged along by that terrible mare!"

"You would ride her in spite of remonstrances," said Raoul. "I only wonder your life has not paid the penalty of your wilfulness."

"*You* would not care if it had!" she exclaimed, trying to draw herself away from his supporting arm. "Oh, Raoul, if you only knew how little I value my life, you would not wonder at my recklessness."

Raoul's face grew strangely pale at the impetuous words. Involuntarily his thoughts travelled back to a time, when in the brilliant beauty of a southern land, a fair girl face had smiled upon him; a reckless, passionate love been cast at his feet—a love which he had neither wooed, nor valued. With that memory came back the old haughty scorn which his momentary pity had driven from his face. In her weakness and helplessness this woman was even more hateful to him than before, because she could claim his pity and enforce his assistance.

"I fancy the others will be here soon," he said, purposely ignoring her last words. "Estelle took their road; if they see

her riderless, they will be sure to return to see whether there has been any accident."

"I hope they will not," exclaimed Blanche. "I don't want them now. I am thankful they were not near me; thankful even for the accident which might have been my death, because"—she paused and looked at him with glowing, passionate eyes—"because, Raoul, for once you have been kind, for once I have seen you gentle; because for these few moments of your care, I could almost—die—content.

"Oh, hush?" he said, pained and distressed beyond words at this wild, impetuous outburst. "You do not think what you are saying."

"Do I not?" she cried, with a faint laugh, merciless in its scorn of her own weakness. "Do I not? I know it only too well. I shall know it all my life—I shall know it till I learn to hate you for the pain, and the misery, and the shame of it all, as I pray to hate you and—cannot."

"Madame!"—The proud, grave face beside her burned hotly with the shame that she did not seem to feel for herself—"Madame, I cannot listen to such words. Even your weakness is no excuse for what is dishonour to you as a wife and a woman."

"How stern and cold you are! Merciless and proud—is that not the creed of you de Verdreuil? All the waves of a woman's love may beat and dash themselves against that firm, invincible rock of pride and self-restraint which your race possess, and beat in vain. Oh, Raoul! Raoul!" and suddenly bending her face on her clasped hands, she burst into a paroxysm of tears and sobs, which shook her from head to foot.

Raoul gazed at her in silent amazement and bitter wrath. That this woman—his father's wife, the mistress of his home—should so give herself over to the shame and senselessness of this unsought love for him, was a humiliation deep and intense, all the more so because of his own pride of will, and force of self restraint, which could neither comprehend nor make allowances for her own deficiency in those qualities.

Fortunately at this moment the rapid sound of horses' feet was audible in the distance, and, with an expression of intense relief, Raoul exclaimed, "I hear the others coming, madame. Do you think you could manage to sit up alone now?"

She flushed crimson all over her delicate face and throat, and drew herself swiftly away from his arm.

"I think so," she said, her voice changing from its tremulous tones, and growing cold and proud as his own. "Thank you for all your assistance, monsieur. If you will lend me your hand, I think I can rise and stand now."

Raoul assisted her to her feet in silence. She was evidently only bruised and shaken, as she had said, for she was quite able to stand.

"What a dreadful object I must look!" she said presently, as she began twisting up the fallen shower of hair which covered her like a mantle. "Is my forehead very much bruised? It feels twice its size, somehow."

"The bruise is swelling, I think," said Raoul, intensely relieved by the matter-of-fact tone the conversation had assumed. "But you can soon have remedies applied when you get home, madame. Ah! and that reminds me, how are you to get home? Can you ride, do you think?"

"What horse can I have?" she questioned doubtfully. "No, monsieur, I see nothing for it but to wait here till I have a carriage sent from the château."

"I will ride back then and order it," said Raoul eagerly. "The others will be here in a moment, and you can explain the accident. In less than an hour I hope to be back, madame."

He hastily mounted his horse, and rode off just as Blanche became the centre of an eager, sympathising group, all full of curiosity and alarm, and offers of assistance, which she laughingly declined, declaring herself to have been more frightened than hurt.

Raoul did not return with the carriage. The old Count de Verdreuil had hastened in great anxiety and alarm to the scene of the disaster; but Blanche, now quite recovered from the effects of her fall, was not as pleased at his concern as she might have been, and treated his anxiety with ridicule, and even indifference. All the way home she maintained a rigid silence; and her husband gazing fondly and adoringly at the pale, lovely face, wondered a little at its unusual gravity. When she reached the château she went straight to her own rooms, nor did she appear among the guests any more that night, pleading fatigue and indisposition as her excuse.

CHAPTER VI.

YET I AM WELL!

"One woman is fair, yet I am well; another is wise, yet I am well; another virtuous, yet I am well; but till all graces be in one woman, one woman shall not come in my grace."—*Shakespeare*.

"I COULD not undertake your mission, Albert, the chestnut put it out of my head this morning," said Raoul de Verdreuil, as with his arm in that of Albert Hoffmann's, he paced up and down the terrace that evening.

"Could you not?—I am not sure that it matters after all, Raoul. I don't think I care about having my opera performed by these people here. They would in the first place think it too much trouble to study it. Then I must engage an orchestra; I think the music is too difficult for any amateur players, and on the whole, Raoul, I think I would rather the matter stood over for a little time."

"Why, Albert," cried his friend, stopping in his walk, and gazing curiously at the boyish face which crimsoned like a girl's before his searching eyes, "why, my dear boy, what has come over you since the morning? You were quite full of this idea then."

"Yes, I know," said Albert, his voice growing more confused. "But you see I have been thinking it over again, and I heard—I mean I have seen—I have heard a voice—and—"

"*Mon cher*," cried Raoul, in a tone of mock solemnity, "this is really too much of a mystery! You have heard—you have seen a voice. What in the name of all that's wonderful have you seen? A fairy or a pixie, or what? She seems to have confused your senses considerably, at all events."

"Well, don't laugh, and I'll tell you, Raoul," said Albert, making a strong effort to conquer his habitual bashfulness; and then he proceeded to give his friend an account of Vivienne's appearance in the music-gallery that morning; her wonderful voice; her strange, romantic history; all of which had made so deep an impression on him. "She is as beautiful as a dream," he went on; "and so proud and graceful, yet withal so innocent and helpless; and then her voice—anything more magnificent you cannot imagine; and oh, Raoul! if you could only see her!" and, having entangled himself amidst these involved phrases, Albert paused from sheer want of breath.

Raoul smiled, the kindly, gentle smile which he so rarely gave to anyone but those he loved.

"My dear boy," he exclaimed; "the idea of your turning champion for damsels in distress is really too absurd. What in the world will happen next?"

"Ah! don't make fun of me, Raoul," pleaded the boy. "Is it any wonder that I feel for this friendless girl? She has the same love for art, the same need of sympathy and encouragement, and like me she has lost her parents; she has no home of her own."

"And what have you promised to do for her?" inquired Raoul, his voice grave and earnest now, in sympathy with the boy's evident feeling.

"I thought of speaking to the countess about her," said Albert, timidly. "You see, Raoul, it would be nothing to her to befriend this girl, and raise her to a position more suitable than the one she now occupies; her own genius will do the rest. Vivienne St. Maurice would be one of the finest and most marvellous singers of the day, if trained and educated for the life and profession of one."

"Oh! now I see why the performance of the opera has been postponed," said Raoul drily. "This marvellous prima-donna in embryo is of course the only singer whose voice could do justice to your music—now."

Albert coloured hotly. "Don't be so unjust, Raoul," he said. "It is not like you to distort motives in this manner, and I thought," he added, with a ring of disappointment in his voice, "I thought I had only to speak to you and you would be glad to help her—she is so friendless."

"Don't get so doleful over it," said his friend, smiling in spite of himself at the boy's woe-begone expression. "I am quite as much interested in the girl as you could desire, but what do you want me to do? Not intercede with the countess on her behalf, I hope. If I did so, your philanthropic schemes would be useless immediately. Blanche de Verdreuil is in my opinion the last woman in the world to feel any sympathy for distressed innocence, or pure ambition. I don't think the history of this friendless girl, with the wonderful voice and romantic story, would interest the countess sufficiently to make her relieve or assist her in any way."

"But I must try to enlist her sympathy, at all events," said Albert. "I promised Vivienne I would."

"How naturally you say that name!" said Raoul, smiling in spite of himself. "What an enchantress this girl must be! I thought art was to be your only mistress; you will find love a dangerous rival; poets, painters, musicians—artists, in fact, of every creed find half their power is gone when they ever succumb to a rival influence. And women are too jealous of

the only antagonist who has ever competed with their charms successfully, to let the love for art reign in sole and undisturbed possession of a man's heart. Once love, and you are shorn of your strength; you lose half your power. You sink your individuality into the interests and nature of another, and art ceases to become the *one* delight of your heart, and, as a natural consequence, your future can never bear out the promise of your past."

"But that is a very one-sided view of the case, Raoul," said Albert eagerly; "I never heard of an artist whose life became barren or unfruitful, simply because a woman shared it. I do not think that genius can be cramped or killed in any man's heart by the presence of a pure and holy love, and though I am little skilled in women's ways, of this I am sure, that no true woman would ever strive to weaken the hand, or dull the brain, or destroy the enthusiasm, which made the man she loved famous in the eyes of the world."

"No *true woman*—perhaps not; but where so many are false, it would be a difficult matter to find one true, I fancy."

"Oh, Raoul, some day you will not be so hard on them. Some day you yourself will know what love is, and then——"

"Then I shall make a fool of myself after the most approved fashion, I suppose," laughed his friend; "but I have managed to exist very comfortably as yet, without them, and I hope I may long do so. I feel inclined to say, like Benedict, 'Till all graces be found in one woman, one woman shall not come in my grace.'"

Albert was silent for some moments.

"Do you really think you will never love, Raoul?" he asked presently, "you always scoff at it as such utter weakness. Do you never fear it may become a reality to yourself?"

"In sober earnest, I never trouble myself to think about it at all. It seems absurd to see other men hang on a woman's smile, and fall at a woman's feet, and languish for a word from her lips. I certainly can never imagine myself doing anything of the kind, nor do I fear such a fate."

For Raoul de Verdreuil had yet to learn the truth of the words he had laughed at as idle that very morning; that love—despised as weakness—becomes terrible one day in its awakened strength; a master instead of a slave.

* * * *

An hour later the rooms were filled with guests. The absence of the hostess in no way interfered with the pleasure of the evening. In the card-room a few men were playing; Raoul de Verdreuil amongst the number. They played long, and the stakes were high; and far on into the night the reckless play lasted. When they broke up and strolled away, some to the

smoking-room, some to their respective chambers, Raoul lingered for a little beside the piano, where Albert sat playing quaint, dreamy music, that seemed to suit the hour and the silence around.

"Go on," he said presently, as he leaned back in his chair with his eyes wandering ever and anon to the rapt, earnest face of the player; and the boy obeyed, while the sweet, soft melodies floated through the room with a strange, pathetic eloquence, and Raoul closed his eyes and let the dreamy peace of the music calm and soothe him as it would.

It ceased at last, and Albert left the instrument and came towards him.

"Why are you so silent, Raoul?" he said softly

"Ah, Albert!" his friend cried with sudden passionate regret, "If I only knew I had led a life as pure and sinless as your own! If, keeping you beside me always, I too might learn what stainless chivalry might live even in a *man's* heart, I think I should be happier for the knowledge than ever I can be now."

"Dear Raoul," spoke the pleading, tender voice—always so loving and so gentle when that name was uttered, "you could not be better in my eyes for any life you led. You are so noble, so generous, so true. If you have pride, it is only one that holds your honour a more priceless possession than your rank. If you have ambition, it is always pure and great, with no mean, unscrupulous ends in view. You are a friend any man might be proud to call by that name, because it means so much to you, because its faith is so nobly kept, its spirit so thoroughly understood. Don't say you would change yourself in any way, Raoul, for I *could* not love you more were you better; I could not love you less were you a thousand times worse."

Raoul looked at him quickly. So brave and pure and trustful the young face seemed, with that light of love and earnestness shining through it.

"I wonder if you will think so always?" he said, hurriedly, for his voice was unsteady, and its calm, even tones had forsaken him. "God grant it; and now go to bed. I cannot have you keeping such hours as these; you will be laid up if you don't take care."

"Yes, I am tired, I think," said Albert, a little wearily, as he clasped Raoul's hand in farewell. "Are you not coming too, Raoul?"

"Presently. I must pay the smoking-room a visit first; be thankful, *mon cher*, that you haven't learnt what it is to be under the tyranny of that awful power—a weed. Now be off with you!"

But he did not go to the smoking-room till long after his

friend had left. Slowly and thoughtfully he paced the room to and fro, in ceaseless, restless measure.

"It is best for me to leave," he muttered at last, as he stopped that monotonous pacing. "She is not to be trusted, and I—I must guard *his* honour if I can, for indeed he may not long be able to guard it for himself."

Then he went, and only when the sunrise glowed warm and ruddy in the east did he throw himself down to rest and sleep. But the rest was troubled and disturbed, and his face, with its calm, proud gravity, was shadowed by unquiet dreams—by the passing touch of sleepless passions, and thoughts which no slumber could deaden.

CHAPTER VII.

IN POOR ATTIRE.

"As shines the moon in clouded skies.
She in her poor attire was seen,"—*Tennyson*.

A WARM, tranquil night.

The stars gleam in the deep, clear blue of the sky. The night-dews glisten on the grass and shine in the hearts of the roses; the heavy scents of flowers float up from the gardens below the terraces; the whole of the Château of Renonx is ablaze with lights, and the painted oriels gleam through the screen of foliage, while the dusky shadows of the twilight reign without.

Blanche de Verdreuil stands on the terrace fronting the château—the soft folds of her dress floating behind her, and the gleam of diamonds sparkling in the rich gold of her hair.

She looks wonderfully beautiful in the dusky light, while her eyes gaze out on the wide-stretching park, the silver spray of the fountains, the white gleam of the marble statues. How still the whole country lies in the hush of that starlit peace! How, in the dark, still, dewy night, all woe and weariness seem as unremembered things.

Blanche leans her cheek on her hand and listens languidly to the tale she hears—the tale which Albert Hoffmann at last finds courage to tell, for already a week has passed since Vivienne St. Maurice came to the château.

His voice is very low and very earnest as he confides to the beautiful woman beside him the strange romantic history of the friendless girl, whose genius is so rare, whose poverty so great.

"How long ago is it since she came?" asked Blanche

presently ; “a week did you say ? That was before Raoul left, then ?”

“Yes, madame. It was the very day you met that accident by falling from your horse.”

“And why did you not tell me about her before ?” asked Blanche, glancing up at him with radiant, smiling eyes.

“Because you never gave me the opportunity, madame ! You know for three days you did not leave your room, and since then you have been so much engaged, I scarcely liked to intrude upon you with this history.”

“Did Raoul know of it ?” asked the countess.

“Oh yes, madame, I told him at once ; but he said of course it was not a case a man could interfere with.”

“Do you know ?” asked Blanche presently, while a faint flush wavered on her cheek,—“do you know why Raoul left so hurriedly ?”

“No ; I wish I could say I did,” said Albert, a little sadly ; “he pleaded business, but I scarcely think it was solely and entirely business that took him away from here. But one can never question Raoul too closely.”

Blanche de Verdreuil was silent for some moments.

“It was strange,” she said musingly ; “he promised to stay a month at Renonçeux, and was not here a week !”

“Raoul was always a bird of passage,” said Albert, smiling ; “his movements are generally uncertain, and his time never his own. But I wish he had not left so soon. For a whole year I had not seen him, and then—only to stay a week after all.”

“Perhaps he will come again in the autumn,” said Blanche ; “did he give any hint of doing so ?”

“None whatever,” answered Albert, “but still I hope he will come. He is going to England now, and he never stops there long, I know.”

Blanche was silent again. Her thoughts seemed wandering far away, and Albert began to think he had not after all succeeded in interesting her about Vivienne. Suddenly she turned to him again—

“The girl is very beautiful, you say ?”

“Yes, madame ; but her beauty is far from being her only charm. It is her gifts—her genius for which I plead. It would be sad if they were lost.”

“Beautiful, gifted, and an orphan ! I was an orphan too, yet none offered to befriend me,” said Blanche in a low, sad voice unlike her own. “And what do you wish me to do for this girl ?” she continued, turning suddenly to Albert. “Adopt her, educate her, or turn her into a prima donna who will astonish the world by her advent ?”

"I want you to see her yourself," said Albert earnestly ; " her life is now one of poverty and obscurity—a life for which she is in every way unsuited. At present she is a mere child, free and careless and unconscious of harm, but she knows her gifts. No amount of poverty and hardships could ever yet stifle genius in a human soul. It will assert itself ; it will speak out its power. And this girl is, after all, only true to her sex. She is conscious of her own ability ; and, being so, she cannot be content, while cramped and restrained in the exercise of it. What woman could ?"

"How eloquently you plead her cause !" said Blanche, a faint smile lingering on her lips as she spoke. "Indeed, so powerful a champion must have good reason for his interest and zeal. You have made me quite anxious to see this wonder of yours, monsieur. Where did you say she lived ?"

"Just on the outskirts of the wood, madame ; the carriage-road leads by the cottage."

"You have soon found that out, I see," said Blanche, laughing. "Have you paid her a visit since she was at the château, monsieur ?"

"No ; certainly not," answered Albert coldly. "Poor as Mademoiselle St. Maurice is, and humble as her circumstances seem, she is as proud, and as deserving of respect as any lady in the land."

"*Sans doute*, monsieur—in your estimation. Well, I feel curious to see this wonder. But mind, I make no promises ; if she is as proud as you say, she will not be an easy subject for either patronage or assistance, I imagine. And now let us go indoors and have some music. The night air grows chill, I think."

Albert gave her his arm without a word, and as he watched her pass from group to group, the centre of attraction wherever she moved, he almost doubted whether his conversation had left any impression on her mind.

That it had done so, Blanche de Verdreuil could have assured him with perfect truth ; for she felt strangely interested about this girl, of whom she had heard twice already ; and the very morning after her conversation with Albert Hoffmann she set out to pay her promised visit.

Vivienne St. Maurice had already begun to doubt the sincerity of Albert's promises, and to fancy he had forgotten her entirely. Standing at the porch of her cottage home one bright sunny morning, and dwelling, as she so often dwelt, on the memory of that interview, she was suddenly startled by the noise of approaching wheels.

They came nearer and nearer—so near at last that she turned her head and saw a dainty little pony-carriage driven by a

woman so wonderfully lovely that the girl looked at her in amazement, wondering how anything so fair could be human. A little page, dressed in the De Verdreuil livery, sprang down from his seat as the carriage paused at the cottage gate, and took the reins from the hands of his mistress. Then Vivienne, suddenly recovering her scattered senses, became aware that the visitor was looking inquiringly towards her, and hastened swiftly down the garden path to receive her.

"Is this Manon Beauvoir's cottage?" inquired the lady.

"Yes, madame," said Vivienne, blushing at the earnest scrutiny of the gaze she met.

"And you? you are Vivienne St. Maurice, I suppose?" pursued her interrogator.

"Yes, madame."

"Ah! Perhaps you do not know me. I have not been long enough at Renonçeux to make acquaintance with all my people. I am the Countess de Verdreuil."

"Will madame be pleased to enter?" said the girl shyly, flushing to her temples as she thought of Albert's promise, and saw he had not forgotten it. "Shall I call gran'mère to receive her?"

"Oh no!" said Blanche de Verdreuil lightly, "I only came to see you. We will go and sit there in the garden, under that great pear-tree of yours, and I will tell you my reasons for this visit."

And, gathering up the trailing silken skirts of her dress, the countess followed the girl to the rustic seat she had mentioned. She was startled at Vivienne's beauty, the grace of her figure, the rich southern loveliness of her face, the sweet, shy manner that yet was free from all rustic awkwardness and diffidence. But above all there was something about her face, her smile, her look, that brought back some memory to her thoughts, that haunted her with a dim recollection of some other face she had seen, but whose fugitive likeness she could not follow or trace at present.

She seated herself on the bench, while Vivienne remained standing opposite her—the warm sunlight falling through the boughs and touching her cheek with its hot kiss, till the scarlet bloom deepened, and the great dark, glowing eyes gained new brightness. Blanche de Verdreuil, leaning back on her seat, and keenly scrutinizing the girl's face and figure, grew more puzzled every moment.

"I suppose you are surprised to see me?" she said presently. "The truth is, that Monsieur Hoffmann, my husband's ward, has been speaking to me about your voice. He heard you sing, and was so struck by your proficiency that he wishes me to see

if I can aid you in turning your talents to account. Should you like to be a great singer, mademoiselle?"

"Oh yes, madame!" cried the girl eagerly. "But is it possible? do you think I could?"

Blanche laughed a little coldly.

"I should say your face was a fortune in itself, without your voice being in the question at all," she answered. "I have not heard you sing yet, or I could judge better of your powers. But of course, to be a singer you must study your art; you must learn to act as well. Should you care to do this?"

The girl's face clouded.

"I should like it—yes; but grand'mère, she thinks the stage so wicked. Even when I told her of all that monsieur at the château said to me, she scolded me for listening to him. She said she would never allow me to go to any theatre, or act or sing in public, as long as she lived."

"Ah! that alters the case of course. Well, let me hear your story—as much of it as you know. Perhaps I can find some other means of assisting you. With that picture of a face you deserve a better fate than to be buried alive in this wretched hovel."

This beautiful, soulless, sensual woman, with her exquisite face, and her shallow nature, was for once interested and absorbed by the strange attraction of this girl's manner, and the charm of face and voice which gave her history, simple as it was, a nameless charm of its own. That she was well-born she could not doubt; the poise of her head, the ease and grace of manner, the sweet, high-bred dignity which sat so naturally upon her, were all indications of birth far above her present station; and ever and anon that strange memory, that dim likeness she could not follow, flashed across Blanche de Verdreuil's mind as she listened to the girl's simple story, and by its light read all the danger the world would hold for one so lovely and so unprotected.

"That is all?" she questioned, as Vivienne ceased speaking at last.

"All, madame."

"I wonder why this girl interests me," thought the countess. "It seems absurd to think of *my* turning philanthropist. But I like her, strange to say, though, as a rule, my own sex are about as indifferent to me as anything else that does not contribute to my enjoyment." "A sad story," she continued aloud. "But, mademoiselle, you need have no fear of the future if you choose to accept the favours of chance. No one could sentence you to poverty and obscurity with a face that is a poem in itself, and a voice which, from all accounts, may rival Pasta's. Suppose you come to the château for a little while; see how you like the life

there. My guests leave in a few weeks now. You are welcome to stay with me then, and I will see what I can do for you."

"Oh, madame!" cried the girl joyfully, "do you really mean it? How kind, how good you are!"

Blanche laughed—a scornful, harsh laugh that somehow jarred on the girl's ear, and pained her heart. Why, she could not tell.

"Am I? You are the first that ever said so. Well, will you come when I send for you?"

"But gran'mère," said Vivienne hesitatingly, "she is so old, so helpless, madame. I cannot leave her."

"Nonsense," said the countess impatiently, while a shade of irritation clouded her eyes. "You don't mean to drag her about everywhere you go, I suppose? I cannot certainly have wooden shoes and serge petticoats in my reception-rooms, even to please you, *petite*. No, if you come to me you must come alone; and you must forget this rustic life for the time being; I will give you plenty of opportunity for doing so."

Vivienne hesitated. The temptation was very powerful, but still a lingering doubt of its motives shadowed her prospects of happiness.

"If your visit pleases you," continued Blanche, feeling a strange inclination to tempt this girl to accept her offer, "you may stop with me altogether, if you like. Renonçeux is dull enough when my guests leave, and I must remain there during the autumn and winter. I should like a companion, *mademoiselle*; with a year or two of education and culture you would be irresistible. Surely this wretched, poverty-stricken life is not worth a thought beside the one I offer you."

"But gran'mère," persisted Vivienne, "what will she do here alone?"

"She will not be selfish enough to mar your prospects, I imagine," said the Countess de Verdreuil. "Of course you must give her up if you come to me. But you will be treated like a young princess at Renonçeux; you will have done with poverty and obscurity. Now what do you say to my offer? will you accept it?"

How self-confident the question was! How little doubt lingered in Blanche de Verdreuil's mind concerning its ready acceptance!

But the girl still stood before her, motionless, speechless; her breath coming and going in quick uncertain gasps,—a sense of bewilderment and uncertainty in her mind.

At last she spoke.

"Madame, your offer is generous—too generous almost, it seems to me. But ought I to accept it? I have no claim upon

you—no right to your bounty and interest ; and—pardon me, madame, but it seems as if to agree with your demands I must give up the only friend I have in the world—the faithful love which has sheltered and guarded me so long—that I, in short, must desert, in her helpless old age, the very protectress and guardian of my life hitherto ; and for what ? to benefit myself entirely. Oh, madame, do not tempt me ! Indeed, indeed, to act as you would have me act seems so ungrateful. It cannot be right, I feel sure.”

“You are very foolish, I think,” said Blanche, rising and surveying the girl with cold, astonished anger ; “you will doubtless never have such another chance offered you ; and my conditions are so simple, I cannot understand why you refuse them.”

“I hope you are not angry, madame,” said Vivienne timidly. “I know you are most kind, most generous ; but, even though my heart craves for the life your words open to me, I cannot forget that my first duty is to her who took me from my dead mother’s arms—who sheltered and cared for, and protected me, even in her poverty—who has been the only friend I have known, and whom you ask me to forsake.”

The proud, simple words touched Blanche de Verdreuil’s heart with a faint sense of shame, but she only answered coldly,—

“Of course you must please yourself ; I only hope you may never repent your present decision.” Then she turned haughtily away, and Vivienne followed to open the gate for her.

The one chance she had longed for—the one hope she had cherished—she had lost now. The girl’s face paled as the thought crossed her mind,—“Was she not acting foolishly ? Would she not repent it all her life long ?”

“Adieu, mademoiselle !” spoke the clear, cold voice of the offended countess. “If you do change your mind, perhaps you will let me know. Take a week to consider all I have said.” Then she took the reins in her hands, and in a few moments was out of sight.

“Was it a dream ?” thought Vivienne, standing there and gazing after the fairy-like equipage gradually disappearing amidst a cloud of dust. “Was it all a dream ? or have I really refused what my heart has been longing for these months past ?”

She bent her head on the gate where her arms rested, and thought of all she had lost by her decision—of the grandeur and beauty and endless enjoyment of the life she had voluntarily refused, and then, in contrast to it, of the humble cottage, the daily toil and anxiety, the hard, ceaseless routine of her present life.

"But I could not forsake gran'mère," she said as she raised her head and proudly dashed away the tears in her soft, wistful eyes. "I could not; it would be so base, so ungrateful. Oh! why did the countess make it so hard for me to decide?"

Then she walked back to the cottage and entered it. How poor and humble it looked! How the red-brick floor, with its one worn shred of carpet, and the rush-bottomed chairs, and even the neat array of the simple homely ware on the shelves struck upon her notice!

How bare and destitute this home was, and how utterly devoid of anything save the barest necessities, the meanest comforts! She glanced at the coarse rough dress of her faithful old nurse, busied now about the ordinary duties of her life, the simple, domestic cares which to her seemed so important—to the young girl, in her youth and strength, and beauty, so trivial.

Involuntarily, Vivienne contrasted this life of hers with what it might have been; and her eyes, wandering to the rough serge garments of her own wear, seemed to behold again the exquisite robes and delicate laces of Blanche de Verdreuil's costly toilette.

"I have had a visitor, gran'mère," she said presently, as she took the soup-pot from the old woman's feeble hands and set it on the fire. "Did you see our lady from the château here?"

"No, child!" exclaimed the old woman in astonishment; "what did she come for?"

"To see me, I believe," said Vivienne carelessly, "at least, so she said. It appears, gran'mère, that the gentleman I saw in the music-gallery the other day has spoken to the countess about—about my voice, and she wants me to become a singer. She would educate me for it herself, and she wished me to live at the château entirely."

"Did she say so?" exclaimed gran'mère Beauvoir in unfeigned astonishment: "did she really say so, *petite*? To live at the château? Now our Lady be praised, but this is, indeed, good news!"

"Would you like me to go there?" asked Vivienne, wistfully, as she came and leant on the back of the chair where the old woman had seated herself to recover from her astonishment.

Gran'mère hesitated a moment.

"Like it? Nay, *petite*, thou art the very sunshine of my old eyes! Like it? no! But then I must think of thee, dear child. My life is but a rough and coarse one for such as thee, Vivienne. I can never forget thy mother was a lady, and I am only a peasant. Well, what more said the countess?"

"Oh, many things," answered the girl; "but what need to repeat them now? I am not going to Renonçeux: I told her so."

"Not going?" echoed gran'mère in surprise. "Why, *petite*?"

"Why? Because she burdened her invitation with an impossible condition," said Vivienne proudly. "I was to leave you—leave you, gran'mère. Oh! how could she be so heartless as to ask it?"

"Truly, child, you were foolish to think she would not ask it," said the old woman tenderly. "Is it likely that I can go to the château? Am I fit for the presence of the great lords and ladies there?"

"You are fit for a queen's palace, gran'mère," cried the girl, eagerly and impulsively, as she knelt down by the side of her aged friend and drew the frail old hands tenderly down on her bowed head; "and where you cannot go, I will not. Do you think I would ever leave you—you, who have stood in place of father and mother to me so long—my one best friend on earth?"

Gran'mère's eyes grew dim as she listened to the sweet, impulsive words.

"Ah, *chérie*," she answered softly, "I am old and feeble now. The blessed saints have heard my prayers and opened a new home for you when the old home can be yours no longer. Dear child! you must go to the château for my sake."

"And leave you here to die alone and helpless? A fitting return truly, to make for a lifetime of devotion! Oh, gran'mère, do you think so badly of me as to ask it?"

"Not now, not just now, *chérie*; but when I am gone, when you have no friend or protector left; then, Vivienne, you must promise me to accept this shelter. You will have a home more fitted for you than this, *petite*, and I shall be content to go when I know I leave you safe."

"Oh, gran'mère, gran'mère," cried the girl, bursting into a passion of weeping, "don't break my heart by saying you will leave me! How can you die and leave me in this great lonely world alone?"

"Dear child, it is God's will!"—and the aged voice grew reverent, and the trembling hands more firm in their clasp—"God's will, Vivienne; and if thy future is safe, my heart will be at peace. When the time comes, He will be Thy Protector and thy Friend!"

CHAPTER VIII.

A STORY OF THE PAST.

THE autumn was dying.

Slowly and softly the last sighs of its fragrant breath rested on the earth; the amber glow of the leaves, and the flush of scarlet berries, and the ceaseless fall of the last petals left on the late roses, all told the same sad tale—of glory vanished, of beauty dead.

The guests had departed from Renonçeux, and the château itself looked gloomy and melancholy in the dusky October gloom, while the wind moaned softly through the grey turrets, and sighed amongst the clinging ivy, and swept the falling showers of autumn leaves along the deserted terraces and untrodden walks.

Blanche, Countess of Reconçeux, sat alone in her boudoir, listening to the moan of the wind as it swept at intervals across her windows. Her eyes were gazing wearily into the bright flame before her—the flame that lit up the soft burnished gold of her hair, and shone on the white folds of her trailing dress, and the gleam of scarlet from the roses in her bosom, the only ornament she wore.

She had a book in her hand, but her eyes never rested on the page that was open before her, and the whole expression of her face was one of weariness and discontent; for, with all her beauty and all her wealth, Blanche de Verdreuil was a disappointed and dissatisfied woman.

She had married for two potent reasons—revenge and safety. Her position as Countess of Renonçeux was unassailable, she thought. The wealth and honours for which she had given her soulless beauty were all the payment she had desired; but she craved for constant gaiety and excitement, for the homage of men, the envy of women, and the smiles of the world around her. She hated quiet and retirement; she, who was so used to conquest, could not exist without some one to subjugate and charm. All-conscious of her power and beauty as Blanche de Verdreuil was, that power was valueless when the world could not witness it, when men could not bow to it.

And the countess was seriously angered now, for all her persuasions had failed in inducing her husband to take her from Renonçeux when her guests left. Her complaints and murmurs he treated as the whims of a spoiled child. Renonçeux was his home, and there he would remain till the spring. She could not induce him to change his decision, and she was

obliged to submit to it. But her heart was wrathful and indignant, and her changing caprices and whims were enough to try the patience of any one less blind and devoted than her still infatuated husband.

But Blanche told herself at last that she must be careful not to show her true character yet; that prudence and self-control were necessary for the schemes already planned and resolved upon by her mischievous brain; so, finding that fretting and complaining only brought fresh showers of endearments and caresses upon her, only pained and distressed him, without in any way altering his resolution, she came to the conclusion that she had better submit, with as good grace as she could assume, to this enforced retirement, inwardly resolving to atone for it by every imaginable caprice and extravagance when she went to Paris in the spring.

Sitting there now in her luxurious boudoir, her thoughts were all of the plans and purposes of the future—the future which she promised herself should be bright and brilliant, and enviable as wealth and beauty such as she possessed could make it. The intoxication of triumph, the might of gold, the all-powerful magic of a woman's loveliness, were hers; and if, armed with them, the world did not fall at her feet and render her its homage, the world was harder to please than the vanity of woman believed possible.

A knock came at her door as she thought of these triumphs and indulged in these visions of the future. She turned impatiently at the summons. "The count, I suppose," she muttered: "*entrez.*"

Her page entered with a note. "The bearer waits," he said with a low bow. "I told him madame was occupied, madame was not to be disturbed; but he said it was life and death; he is in great haste; he awaits madame's pleasure below."

The countess glanced hastily over the note, and then tossed it contemptuously into the flames.

"Dying," she said, as she looked from the glowing delicate hues of her chamber to the gloom and darkness of the night. "And why should I go to her? What is her secret to me?"

"Madame will be pleased to send the man away?" insinuated the page.

"Yes, bid him go! I have no answer;" and she settled herself once more down to the enjoyment of her fireside reverie.

Another knock, and the page entered again.

"Pardon, madame! but this man actually refuses to go with that message. He says madame is absolutely wanted. The woman says she cannot die till she sees madame. Ah! what obstinacy; it is unheard of!"

"Order me the close carriage. I will go!" exclaimed the countess suddenly. "Quick! what are you waiting for?"

"Pardon, madame! but the night, the weather; it is impossible that madame can go out in such weather, surely!"

"Order it to stop raining, then, for madame's pleasure," said the countess sharply. "Be off, and if the carriage is not here in five minutes you lose your place!"

The page retreated precipitately, and Blanche hurriedly threw a thick dark cloak around her, and exchanged her dainty shoes for walking-boots.

"After all it is as well to hear what she wants!" she muttered during these preparations. "A secret to tell me! I wonder what it is?"

And, with a hasty glance at the mirror, the Countess of Renonçeux left her room, and a moment after was driving through the gloomy October night along the carriage-road which led to Manon Beauvoir's cottage.

* * *

Gran'mère Beauvoir was dying.

The cottage was very silent—silent with that strange hush which only comes when the shadow of the angel of death is brooding overhead, and its outstretched wings fill all the gloom around and above—silent with the silence that only lasts when we watch the sands of a life running slowly and surely out, and know that for the one we watch the weariness of time will soon cease—the mystery of eternity begin.

In a poor, ill-furnished room—a strange contrast to the luxurious chambers at Renonçeux—Blanche de Verdreuil stood by Manon Beauvoir's side.

The brilliance of her youth and loveliness were heightened and intensified by the very poverty and simplicity of her surroundings; but there was a cold, hard glitter in her eyes, a covert smile on the mocking scarlet mouth that were strangely at variance with a death-bed scene.

Vivienne was not present; she had been dismissed by Gran'mère Beauvoir as soon as the Countess of Renonçeux arrived, for the old peasant woman did not wish her darling to hear her strange tale, part of which was founded on reality, the rest on supposition and credence only.

She spoke very low, and oftentimes her tale was interrupted by fits of exhaustion and weakness. Blanche de Verdreuil listened at first indifferently, then attentively, as the words fell from the speaker's lips slowly and painfully, with the failing breath and failing strength of death's near approach. A strange light gleamed in her eyes as the story ceased, and she spoke hurriedly, almost anxiously.

"You say you never mentioned this to any one?"

"No, madame; of what use to mention what were only suspicions in my own mind—suspicions, too, which never seemed likely to have any foundation? It was only very lately that I could even find any clue to the mystery of Count Maurice de Verdreuil's life. All is so dark and strange concerning it. And then—only then—madame, when my strength began to fail, did my mind seem to become clear, and all this I have told you shaped itself out before me. I place it in your hands, madame—a dying woman's bequest, given with a dying woman's trust. You have wealth and influence enough to serve my darling, and you could soon discover whether this tale is founded upon fact. You offered to befriend Vivienne once, madame, and the child refused you, because she would not leave me in my age and helplessness; but now, madame, there is no one to stand between her and your guardianship; and if you are still kind and generous enough to repeat that offer, she must accept it—as gratefully as I would accept it for her."

The aged eyes, with that strange film of death already creeping over them, rested anxiously on the beautiful haughty face.

Blanche was silent.

Her brief interest in Vivienne had long passed away; her selfish nature was incapable of long holding any real, heartfelt, genuine sympathy for another, and she had told Albert Hoffmann that his pretty enchantress had refused her offers of help and assistance, and there the subject had ended, as far as she was concerned; now it was again forced on her notice, and she did not care to resume it.

But the pleading voice of the dying woman never ceased that beseeching entreaty. She *could* not die, it almost seemed, till the safety of her darling was in some way insured, till the care of her future was placed in other hands, when her own resigned the task.

"I would have asked the count himself," she said presently, wondering at the hesitation and indecision of the Countess of Renonçeux, "but I knew how painful a subject that old sad story was, how none have heard it from his lips since that awful day I told you of, madame. And so—"

"Yes, yes; I know!" said Blanche de Verdreuil hurriedly. "Well, do not distress yourself any more; I will promise what you ask. I will take Vivienne to Renonçeux."

"Now our Lady in Heaven bless you, madame, for those words. I know they will be faithfully kept; the race to which your marriage has allied you, never yet broke faith with living or with dead. Here madame," she added, drawing from under her pillow a little shabby desk, all worn with age and travel-stained,

as though it had known many journeyings—"here is the one and only clue I can give you. A feeble one enough, but with God's help and blessing it may serve a good purpose yet."

What purpose it was to serve she little knew as she gave it up into those treacherous hands.

Ah ! life ever hinges upon chance, say what we will. Such little things ; such trifling, careless actions !

If all the "might have been's" that strew the pathway of our lives were garnered up and told, we should know that of all strange things which make human life a mockery of human will, there is none so strange as that which marks the confidence of men's self-built purposes and plans, and the utter indifference to those plans with which Fate sweeps them into nothingness !

BOOK II.

CHAPTER I.

LIFE'S SPRINGTIME.

"I dream'd that as I wandered by the way
Bare winter suddenly was changed to spring."

MANON BEAUVOIR was buried, and the Countess de Verdreuil announced to her husband that she had promised to befriend and protect the beautiful girl who had lived under her guardianship so long—the child who had known no mother's care or father's love; whose nature, whose beauty, and high-born instincts all seemed to unfit her for the coarse, rough life of a peasant, and yet who had no other life to look forward to unless she, Blanche de Verdreuil, gave her the shelter and protection she needed so much.

And the old count thought how sweet and charitable a nature was that of his beautiful wife, and cordially approved of her plan, and welcomed Vivienne to Renonçeux with a chivalry and courtesy such as he might have shown the noblest lady in the land.

It never occurred to him to treat her as a dependant. The first sight of her face, the sound of her voice, the grace and ease which seemed so natural to her, all convinced him that the girl, in spite of the mystery of her birth and parentage, was in all respects fitted for a higher sphere in life than she had hitherto occupied.

So through the autumn and winter, Vivienne remained at the château, and the count insisted upon her having every advantage and instruction possible to complete her neglected education and her wonderful musical talents. Her voice seemed to him as to

every one else—a marvel, and the cultivation and care it now received seemed to add to its charm and perfect its beauty.

In the long winter evenings when it rang through the lofty rooms, thrilling and echoing far out into the night, even Blanche de Verdreuil was entranced by its magical power. Her very teachers were lost in wonder when they heard her, and prophesied she might rival Pasta herself if she chose to do so.

But to Albert Hoffmann this girl's genius and magnificent gifts were as revelations of a new and soul-felt delight, an inexhaustible wonder.

With him the shyness and reserve of her manner were changed to frank and familiar confidence. They were constantly together, and their mutual love for the same art, their passionate delight and absorbing admiration for all belonging to music were naturally sufficient to account for their frequent and uninterrupted companionship. So at least the old count thought, and so apparently did Blanche de Verdreuil, for no restraint was ever placed upon their intercourse, no barrier ever raised between that friendly and almost hourly intercourse which to Albert Hoffmann was gradually becoming the one thing worth living for—the one joy of his life.

And yet to meet and speak and associate with this lovely, gifted girl was a danger whose nature and source of joy he never questioned. He was still so much of a boy in looks, in his shy reserve and habitual diffidence, that to Vivienne he seemed even younger than herself, and she treated him with the frank, natural affection she might have shown to a brother, as indeed she began to consider him; while he day by day let his thoughts dwell on her, watched for her footsteps, hungered for her words and looks and smiles, till his life seemed merged into a paradise of dreams, so holy and so pure, that they coloured every thought and hope of his heart.

He did not speak of them, he hardly dared to breathe the fulness of their meaning even to himself, for they could not be clothed in the language of any earthly passion; they were so vague and dreamy, and yet withal so beautiful in their innocent dawn, so fresh and unsullied by any breath of worldly sophistry, or mere selfish desire, that none could have read them without a deep and intense pity for the boy-dreamer, whose very love was like his nature—a poem not to be understood or read by every eye, but shut up in his own heart's depths, fostered by his own vivid imagination, and coloured by the force of his own fervent fancies and poetic thoughts.

The months glided swiftly by, the winter was never dark, the days never dreary, the hours never long to Albert now. Life was a beautiful, glorious reality, a paradise, an elysium. The

earth seemed glorious and glad as with the radiance of eternal summer. There was no shadow upon its brightness for him, no cloud upon its beauty. Of the future he never thought, of any termination to his dream of delight, which seemed at once so perfect and so inexhaustible, he never questioned. Vivienne was beside him—that was all he knew and all he cared to know.

The girl grew more lovely as the months passed by. The deep, marvellous eyes, the dusky glory of her hair, the rich colouring of the faultless face all grew into yet more vivid beauty with the grace of her dawning womanhood. The sweetness and infinite gentleness of her nature shone out more fully as her timidity and restraint wore off, and the new life she led became habitual in its thousand wonders of luxury and ease which had seemed so strange at first.

Brilliant, graceful, fanciful, and yet with a strange, deep undercurrent of sadness flowing beneath the mirth and buoyancy of her natural character, Vivienne St. Maurice was in every respect a woman dangerously fascinating and dowered with wonderful gifts—a woman whom a man might well deem worthy of his whole heart, a woman whom many would love, but who would only love once, and for ever.

With the first early days of spring, Blanche de Verdreuil left for Paris, only too thankful that her banishment was over, and inwardly vowing never to submit to such an enforced exile, as she termed it, again. Vivienne of course remained at Renonçeux, the countess taking care to provide her with a *chaperon* in the form of an elderly dowager, who was to combine the duties of companion with the charge of the household, in the absence of its mistress.

What blissful months those were to the young artist !

Vivienne and he were together under the same roof, sharing the same life. The days were all gladness, the nights all delight. She was near him. What fairer joy could earth bestow ?

They strolled through woods, all fresh and green with the breath of spring. They watched the day die out in glory and the night shine out of gloom. In the soft dusk of the evening she sang to him, or made him play to her sweet, dreamy melodies of Mendelssohn, or grand and passionate compositions of Beethoven, that stirred her own soul to its very depths with their sublime meaning.

And all unconsciously her smiles, her praises, her very gentleness, and untroubled calm were leading him on to love her with a worship deep and passionate, yet humble as its own strength and exalted trust. Her beauty, perfect as it was, could never

have won such reverence and love from him, had it not been the index of a nature—noble, generous, exalted—yet withal womanly and tender.

Meanwhile Raoul de Verdreuil was drifting from country to country with his usual uncertainty of movement. At intervals he had news from Renonçaux, but for many months he had not heard from Albert, and he began to grow troubled at this unwonted silence, when at last a letter reached him. A strange, odd, bewildering letter it was too—one that raised a smile to his lips, and lit the dark, earnest eyes with a look of quizzical amusement.

"Albert must be hard hit," he said to himself; "six pages, and not one without Vivienne appearing in it two or three times at least. Poor boy! What a pity that he should have taken the disease so early! I'm afraid he'll be quite spoilt for anything by the time I see him again. What a description of the girl too! She must be wonderfully beautiful if she's anything like it. Now I wonder what induced Blanche to have her at Renonçaux. It's odd, and unlike *her*, to say the least of it. I should like to find out her motive!"

He folded up the letter and returned it to its envelope, with a thoughtful look replacing his former amused one, and the old gravity deepening in his eyes.

"What a strange thing it must be to feel all these raptures about a woman!" he exclaimed presently, half aloud, as he rose from his seat and went to the window. "I can't understand it at all myself—long may I say the same, and I think I shall too; my heart must be uncommonly tough, it has stood so many sieges, and yet feels none the worse; and here I am eight-and-twenty years of age, and might be fifty, for all the power a woman has to rouse or interest me."

He looked out on the calm, starry night, on the beautiful rushing waters of the distant Danube, on all the glitter and splendour of the Austrian capital where he was now staying.

"The world is fair enough," so ran his thoughts, "and men are happy enough and content enough while they are *free*. I would not change places with Albert though Vivienne St. Maurice were twice as beautiful, and ten times as enchanting, and that is hardly possible, I suppose."

Then he turned away and entered his dressing-room; he was to go to an ambassador's ball that night, and the hour was already late. Nevertheless, he never hurried his toilet in any way, or troubled himself to remember the fact that bright eyes were watching for him, and lovely faces growing pale with anger or disappointment as the time passed, and his promises to

them seemed forgotten, as indeed they were, for Raoul de Verdreuil rarely paid the compliment of a second thought to any of the women he met in society, and their airy graces and coquettish exactions were too trivial to be remembered in their absence by one so indifferent to their presence.

The ball was at its height when he arrived, and not a few graceful reproaches fell on his ear as one fair aristocrat after another greeted him. For Raoul de Verdreuil had that surest and strongest attraction for all women in the languid, egotistic high-bred society among which he moved—complete and perfect indifference to their charms.

No more complete method exists for rousing a woman's interest than to appear totally careless respecting it. And his coldness was so natural, so unfeigned, that no woman, however beautiful, could ever flatter herself that she had penetrated beneath its icy mask—had ever won a second thought from him when he had left her side. He was perfectly courteous, but withal rarely moved from the grave, serene composure of his manner, and his conquest had become a task even the vainest and the loveliest deemed impossible.

Amidst all the mirth and revelry of the ambassador's ball his face never seemed to lighten with interest or enjoyment, his eyes never seemed to rest on any form, however beautiful, with more admiration than he would have bestowed on a picture presented to his notice, and at any moment a word from some great statesman, or political authority in the ministerial world had twofold more interest for him than the sweetest glance, or softest whispers of any woman present.

When he left the assemblage of brilliant beauties, of titled dignitaries, of political rulers of all nations, a sigh of relief escaped his lips. It seemed that the fresh, sweet air, the starlit night, were doubly grateful after the heated rooms, with their heavy scents and fragrant odours, their glitter of wealth and show, their mockery of enjoyment, and load of insincerity.

He walked on to his hotel, not caring to drive back, late as the hour was, or rather early, for already the dawn was breaking in the east, though the stars were bright as ever in the clear, soft sky above.

He could hear the rush of the swift river sweeping ever onwards to the far-off sea. He could catch the glance of its waters, flowing on with the stars mirrored in their depths, and murmuring a solemn melody, as of the mighty deeds of past ages, the records of dead years.

Something of melancholy, of foreboding, seemed to come to him in that moment; one of those strange, wistful, and wholly indescribable sensations that shadow the brightness of our lives

with the prescience of evil or of sorrow, we know not why. It was new to Raoul de Verdreuil to feel thus, and he wondered dimly why at this moment, when success and high praise had just rewarded his mission, he should experience a feeling so totally at variance with the triumphs he had won.

"I think Albert's letter has made me discontented," he muttered to himself, as he tried to shake off the gloom and heaviness oppressing him. "I have always been first with him, and now I am dethroned for a woman—a girl whom he has known but a few brief months, but yet who has taught him in that space to forget for the first time in our lives his earliest friend. "Am I jealous, I wonder—jealous of the sex I despise? Pshaw! it is ridiculous."

But ridiculous or not, Raoul de Verdreuil could not shake the shadow from his heart, the gloom from his brow.

He walked on, far on, in the cool, fresh dawn of the early day—on till he reached the river's rushing waters, all dark and swift as the restless thoughts of his own mind, and gazing down at them he mused on all the changes they had witnessed, on all the secrets they had kept, while centuries and cycles had swept over them, leaving them still unchanged. Fleeting and innumerable phantoms, generations of the dead seemed trooping by in the faint, grey morning light; wings rushing past like the restless sweep of the waters, fanned his brow in that mysterious solitude.

Thus in years gone by had others mused before him—thus in years to come would others muse long after him. Nations might perish, dynasties change; but the same river would roll on unchanged to the distant sea, and the same thoughts fill men's hearts as they watched its course, and heard its voices speak from the grave of past ages.

CHAPTER II.

LA MODE.

“There's not a joy the world can give, like that it takes away.”—*Byron*.

THE city of Paris is in all the brilliance of its springtide gaiety.

Rank and fashion throng the Bois, and stream after stream of carriages bear their dazzling freight of beauty to inaugurate the season this sunny day of the opening year.

Among the many splendid equipages is one whose occupants seem to attract universal admiration. They are two women, both wonderfully lovely, though in a totally different style ; one is very fair, with a wealth of sunny hair coiled round her small, exquisitely-shaped head, with changing, sparkling eyes and lips like scarlet blossoms. She leans back amid the soft cushions of her carriage, and from time to time bends gracefully in acknowledgment of the many greetings she receives ; for Blanche de Verdreuil is one of the reigning queens of the *beau monde* now.

Her companion is a young girl apparently not more than eighteen years of age. The beauty of a pure and sunny youth, a frank and fearless spirit, speaks out in the glance of the dark eyes, and sparkles in the fair, rich colouring of the dainty face ; the face whose greatest charm is the charm it derives from the soul within.

It is the face of the girl by the brookside ; the face of the listener in the music-gallery at Renonçeux ; the face of the weeping mourner in the poor and shadowy room where her only friend lay dying ; the face that has gladdened the old château for nearly two years past, and now shines forth on the great world of Paris, to learn for the first time the full power of a woman's beauty, when society goes mad for its smiles and crowns it with the *dictum* of its favour. It is Vivienne St. Maurice who sits by Blanche de Verdreuil's side ; Vivienne, scarce changed even now from the girlish dreamer in the woods of Renonçeux ; Vivienne, who, by the Countess de Verdreuil's caprice, is for the first time introduced to the world of a great city, and whose eyes gaze wonderingly at the scene around her, which has all the charm of novelty yet.

It was a sudden whim on the part of the countess to bring her ward to Paris this year—a whim that caused Vivienne herself a curious excitement and flutter of mingled delight and wonder at heart. But she came, and this first day of her glimpse of Parisian life was to her an alternate bewilderment and enjoyment.

"Who is she?"

The fashionable throng asked that question again and again, and yet no answer was given. None knew, or seemed to know, the rank, or name, or history of the lovely girl who passed and repassed as the carriage took its way through the crowded drive.

"What an exquisite face! Do you know who she is?" The speaker, a young and extremely handsome man, leaned forward to address this question to the Duchess de Villemaire, whose set was one of the most exclusive in Paris, and whose gold eyeglass had just been raised to look at the new occupant of the Countess de Verdreuil's carriage.

"A pretty girl. Wants style though, I think," she answered superciliously; "*un peu trop l'air paysanne!*" and she leant back with an expression of complete indifference.

"Oh! your Grace, that is too severe," said the first speaker, the young Marquis d'Orvâl, and the richest and most eligible *parti* then in Paris. "That freshness and piquancy is just the greatest charm of all. One finds Beauty *au naturel* quite refreshing after seeing it so often *à la mode.*"

This was a cruel remark to make considering that the two unmarried daughters of the duchess were present, and that they were both the very height and perfection of *la mode*, though *passé* enough in point of feminine charms to necessitate a constant resort to art instead of nature.

"You know the Countess de Verdreuil, do you not?" continued the Marquis d'Orvâl presently.

"Oh, yes! one knows many people whom you cannot exactly avoid; but I do not visit her."

"She is well received though. Why is your Grace exceptional in your favour?"

The duchess shrugged her shoulders with a gesture more expressive than words.

"She is not one of *us*, that is all. Mysterious beauties raised suddenly to high rank and honours are not yet received in *my* set. I pride myself on being exclusive, Monsieur d'Orvâl, as you know."

The young marquis bowed, and then rode on without further remark. Exclusive or not, the Duchess de Villemaire was anything but agreeable, he thought; and how atrociously plain her daughters were—by daylight!—So his thoughts ran as he rode slowly on, his eyes glancing swiftly among the stream of carriages, ever in search of that one face, the loveliest, he thought, of the many beautiful ones he had seen all his life through.

He saw it at last, with the sunshine lighting the sweet laughing eyes; with the gleam of gold in the heavy masses of hair drawn from the pure white brow; with the scarlet bloom on lips

and cheeks that no hand but Nature's had painted ; and amidst all the beauty and light, and vivid wonderful colouring, there seemed to speak out the fearless, guileless spirit of a child, the sweet unconsciousness of self, which is at once the rarest and most perfect charm of a woman's nature.

The Marquis d'Orvâl knew the Countess de Verdreuil as well as people in society ever know each other. He met her constantly, admired her extremely, listened to all the pretty stories and impertinent suggestions, and boudoir-perfumed scandals he heard about her, and that was all. But now a strange impulse prompted him to join her, as, in the momentary pressure of the crowd, her carriage was obliged to remain stationary.

Another instant, and he was bowing over her hand and receiving her sweetest smiles ; for Blanche knew that this man set the seal of fashion on any one he chose to notice, and she had long and vainly courted his attention in the hope that his *dictum* would raise her to that enviable notoriety which his notice could bestow alike on a *grande dame*, or a ballet-dancer.

"Allow me to introduce you to my ward, Mademoiselle St. Maurice," said Blanche de Verdreuil, after the first greetings had been exchanged.

The Marquis d'Orvâl bowed low to the beautiful girl who had so interested and attracted him, and she returned his salutation with the calm, easy dignity which was so natural and graceful a charm of her manner.

"I think I have not had the pleasure of seeing Mademoiselle St. Maurice in Paris before ?" questioned the marquis, as he rode beside the countess through the crowded drive of the Bois de Boulogne.

"*Cela va sans dire*," laughed Blanche de Verdreuil gaily. "I have only just brought her out. I am going to enact the part of *chaperon* this season, Monsieur d'Orvâl."

"Hardly fair to give you so thankless and fatiguing an office, madame," he answered in the same tone, while his eyes turned admiringly to the faultless loveliness of the new *débutante* again.

Blanche shrugged her shoulders with a pretty affectation of indifference.

"I hope I shall not find it so," she answered. "My ward is not difficult to manage, and though the charge is new and responsible to me, I have no doubt I shall be able to go through with it successfully."

Vivienne's face flushed hotly at the words ; low spoken as they were she heard them, and turned hastily away, as though she dared not trust herself to answer.

The marquis looked from Blanche to her ward with scarce concealed curiosity. It struck him at that moment, that

between the countess and this beautiful girl no great love reigned, and he marvelled not a little that Blanche should have consented to enact the part of *chaperon* to one who was only too likely to prove a dangerous rival. Again and again his eyes wandered to Vivienne's perfect face. He had seen many lovely women, but never one so lovely as this—never one who forced him to interest and wonder despite himself.

Blanche de Verdreuil noted his admiring glances, his wandering replies; and despite the jealousy she felt at Vivienne's easy conquest of this proud, *difficile* noble, she yet congratulated herself on the fact, as it promised success to the schemes already at work in her own brain.

"Shall I meet you at the Embassy ball, madame?" asked D'Orvâl presently.

A shadow of defiant hauteur clouded the brilliant eyes of the countess.

"No, I think not," she said coldly. "We have only just arrived, monsieur, and——"

"Oh! I see," he interrupted, not wishing to put her to the trouble of inventing a fiction to hide the real fact—that she had not been asked. "I merely inquired because I heard Lady S. expressing her doubts as to whether you were in Paris when she was issuing her invitations. I shall have the pleasure of assuring her of your arrival, and that of Mademoiselle St. Maurice."

Blanche de Verdreuil's heart gave a swift throb of triumph and delight. It was the summit of her ambition to get into the exclusive set, of which Lady S. was ruler. She was the wife of the English ambassador, and Blanche, during her two seasons of Parisian life had never been asked to the balls at the Embassy. She wondered whether the Marquis d'Orvâl was in earnest, or whether he merely said what he had done out of politeness.

"I shall confidently expect to meet you there," he continued presently. "Of course your invitations will reach you in the course of a day or two; Mademoiselle will see every one worth knowing in Paris then, for the ball this year is to be one of the most brilliant of the season."

"So I believe," said Blanche calmly, not wishing of course that the marquis should fancy this was the first she had heard of it. "To-night we are going to the Countess de Liramar's—at least, my husband and myself. Vivienne is not to be introduced till my own ball comes off."

"Paris will be the loser for that," said the young marquis, turning to the fair girl beside him. He began to talk to her now, but the grave, beautiful eyes looked so contemptuous at the

soft compliments and unmeaning flatteries with which his conversation was filled, that he plainly saw these courtier-like graces were of no avail to win either interest or regard from her. She was unlike any one he had ever seen ; she was a beautiful and interesting study, piquing, bewitching, and bewildering him at every moment.

The naive unconsciousness, and unaffected ease of her manner were simply enchanting to this man of the world, though he had always boasted that he possessed no pastoral tastes, and that fashion and life were one and the same thing with him. But he was enchained and held in check at one and the same moment by this shy child—so unlike the self-possessed beauties of fashion, and the proud and arrogant leaders of *ton* with whom his whole life had been associated.

Blanche de Verdreuil chatted on of the thousand gay nothings of Parisian scandal, the new rivals for fame at the opera-house, the new beauties of the season to be introduced for the grand Matrimonial Stakes, of the *bal masqué* she was about to give in her hotel in the Faubourg St. Germain, and at which her lovely ward was to make her *début* ; and while she talked and he listened and assented from time to time, his eyes ever rested on the face of Vivienne, with its varying expression, its faultless loveliness and extreme youth.

It was new to him to gaze on charms which Nature's hand alone had formed and coloured ; and the tutored heart of the man of the world was touched and subdued into something far different to its ordinary calm and critical coldness, as he at last left her side, and rode slowly home, to ponder over the interest she had awakened.

"And what do you think of Paris, *ma chère* ?" inquired Blanche of her companion, as their carriage turned homewards at length, and the dense crowd of rank and fashion were left behind ; "or rather, what do you think of the pet of Paris at present, the Marquis d'Orvâl—that Admirable Crichton of the nineteenth century, that epitome of courtesy, good breeding, rank, and wealth, upon whom Fashion has set her seal, and whose smile of approbation is coveted by all, as the one thing needful to give them *prestige* and success ? There can be no doubt about his opinion of *you*, and his verdict once given, all Paris will follow suit, and go wild after you with its accustomed foolish excitement ! Nevertheless, you are very fortunate in succeeding so well ; to have made an impression on this cold and *difficile* critic is a feat to be proud of."

"I am sorry to say I do not feel any particular gratification at having unconsciously satisfied the Marquis d'Orvâl's critical judgment," was the answer. "I thought he was a very insincere,

shallow-minded man ; good looking, certainly ; but then he knows it so well ; that destroys the charm at once."

"My dear Vivienne," exclaimed Blanche de Verdreuil, in horrified astonishment, "what are you saying ? Shallow-minded, good-looking ! the handsomest man in Paris ; the one of all others whose opinion is regarded as immutable ; whose tastes, habits, manners are copied and applauded by the *elite* of society ! for Heaven's sake, child, don't let any one hear you say such things of him. Why they would put you down as some ignorant, foolish girl not worth a thought at once. I tell you, d'Orvâl is worshipped here in Paris. He is the fashion ;—the richest and most honourable in the land court his presence at their houses. He is sought after by all and every rank. He gives the password of admission into the best houses, and the most exclusive circles. Why the very fact of his noticing you is sufficient to proclaim you the belle of the season ; and instead of being proud of, and elated by that notice, you actually presume to criticize its bestower !"

"How much you will have to teach me, madame," said Vivienne, laughing in unfeigned amusement at Blanche de Verdreuil's horrified tones. "But I am such a complete novice, you know ; is it any wonder your great world dazzles and bewilders me at first. The deference you show to this Marquis d'Orvâl's opinions, is to me totally incomprehensible ; but you ought not to wonder at my inability to judge of his merits, when you think of my total ignorance of fashionable life. I fear I shall be a very troublesome pupil to you, madame."

Blanche shrugged her shoulders as if the responsibility was not going to sit very heavily upon her, as indeed she never meant it to do ; but she did wonder a little curiously what she should do with this girl, whose frank, outspoken opinions, and straightforward earnestness, would be serious draw-backs to her worldly teaching. How was she to instruct her in those polished artifices which are so essentially requisite to social success ? How was she to teach her to distinguish detrimentals from eligibles ; to penetrate the mysteries of *ton* ; to refrigerate acquaintances with a glance ; to sweep past inconvenient friends with a cool unconsciousness of their very existence ; to tell polite falsehoods with a charming assumption of truth and sincerity ; to be, in short, of the world—worldly, and in her generation—wise ?

Blanche feared the task would be beyond her powers, for the nature of Vivienne St. Maurice was not one to acquire such accomplishments as these either readily or easily. And yet her chief reason for wishing to adopt Vivienne was that she saw in her a quick and efficient means for securing social success at last. The girl's beauty and accomplishments were of so rare and extra-

ordinary an order, that she was well calculated to shine in society by their right of distinction alone; and the countess imagined if she introduced her as her ward, with all the advantages of rank and wealth to set off her attractions, that she would create a perfect *furor* in Paris. But she had scarcely imagined she could succeed so quickly as she had done, for she knew well that the Marquis d'Orvâl's admiration of Vivienne would raise her to a loftier eminence than any introduction or exertion of her own. She knew, too, that his speech relative to the Ambassador's ball meant an *entrée* for her at last, and for this she felt she was indebted to Vivienne's fair face again. On the whole, therefore, the Countess de Verdreuil felt remarkably well satisfied with her day's amusement, and was inclined to be extremely complacent to Vivienne on the strength of it.

"What a lovely woman!" exclaimed the girl suddenly, as the carriage came abreast of another scarcely less gorgeous than itself, whose occupant was a very handsome woman, with brilliant eyes, and a full, voluptuous figure.

"My dear," cried Blanche turning her eyes away from the retreating vehicle, "I wonder what you can see to admire in her. She is a singer at the Opera, but not at all a proper person; be sure you never remark her before any one, it would be so very awkward."

The girl's dark eyes rested wonderingly on her companion's face. She puzzled over her words for some minutes in silence, and then said,—

"But, madame, it surely is no disgrace to be a singer at the Opera, and this lady looked an *aristocrate au bout des ongles*, I am sure. Why do you say she is not a proper person?"

"Simply because she is *not received*. She was a famous singer, but scandalized herself by making an error—one of those *faux pas* society cannot excuse. She is no longer received; her place has been supplied, and she has, in fact, lost her footing, and will never be able to regain it again. Don't ask any more questions about her, Vivienne; these topics are not for a young girl to discuss." And the countess settled herself back on her cushions with an expression of virtuous disdain that did her infinite credit.

Vivienne felt pained and grieved without knowing why.

"An opera singer," that was what *she* longed to be—the career above all others she deemed most enchanting, most enviable; and Blanche had sneeringly described this beautiful singer as "not a proper person!"

She tried to imagine some motive for such a verdict, but she could think of nothing; and, strange to say, her sympathies were more with the beautiful woman stigmatized as "not

proper" than with her detractor; for Vivienne could not quite fathom the nature of her protectress, and it was so opposite in every respect to her own, that there could be but little sympathy between them. The caprice of her manner, the mockery of all pure and simple impulses, the inconsistencies of character so marked and so self-evident, were all painful and incomprehensible to Vivienne. Sometimes she fancied that the restlessness and caprices of the countess must proceed from a heart ill at ease, a mind dissatisfied, a spirit burdened with the pain of a hidden memory, the weight of past sorrows, or the secrets of other years.

Her coquetry and heartlessness were also antagonistic to Vivienne's lofty creeds of woman's purity and single-mindedness, but she strove to think no ill of her. She told herself how much gratitude she owed her; how she had promised gran'mère on her deathbed that she would abide by the counsels and follow the advice of her new guardian, even as she had done her own; but Vivienne knew that what was done from duty was very different from the service prompted by love alone; and, knowing this, she felt that Blanche de Verdreuil could never win from her a tithe of the devotion, respect, and affection which the poor simple-minded old peasant had won. The one had given, out of her poverty and necessity, such full and perfect measure of love and fidelity as the other could never render out of her abundance. For the faith of the heart is worth a million protestations, or benefits showered down at our feet by those to whom it is no sacrifice to bestow the one, or the other.

CHAPTER III.

"THE IDOL OF MY YOUTH."

"Behold her there
As I beheld her ere she knew my heart,
My first, last love, the idol of my youth."

Tennyson.

IN the full clear warmth of the noonday, while the spring sunshine lit up the grey towers at Renonçeux, and sparkled on the new opened buds and tender leaves, a carriage drove up the broad gravelled drive, and stopped at the entrance of the château. The door was thrown hastily open, and Raoul de Verdreuil, all bronzed and dusty with his long, swift journey back to Lorraine, alighted, and ran up the broad steps with eager impatience visible in his face.

"The family were all in Paris,"—that was the first news he heard in answer to his inquiries.

An exclamation of impatience fell from Raoul's lips.

"Monsieur Hoffmann—was he not at Renonçeux, then?"

"Oh, yes! monsieur was in the music-room. Should he announce Monsieur le Comte's arrival?" asked the footman.

"No; don't trouble," said Raoul carelessly. "I will go and seek him myself; meantime see to my luggage and take it to my room."

The man bowed and turned to assist the young count's valet, while his master walked on through the quiet galleries and deserted rooms on his way to the music-gallery at the farthest end of the château. As he stood outside the heavy velvet doors, he paused to listen for the familiar sound of the organ; but all was silent, and, half doubting whether Albert was really there, he opened the door and went in quietly.

One rapid glance showed him his friend. He was sitting at the organ, but not playing; his arms rested on the key-board, and his head was bent forward on his hands. There was something in the weary grace of the slight figure so expressive of dejection that Raoul's heart gave a swift throb of fear. Had anything happened, he wondered.

He crossed the oak floor lightly, and stood beside him. Albert started at the touch on his arm, and, seeing who it was, gave a cry of astonishment and delight.

"Why, Raoul, is it really you? Dear old fellow, how glad I am to see you! But what a surprise! Why did you not write to me?"

"Three questions in as many seconds!" said his friend, laughing. "How am I to answer them all? Yes, it is really myself. I was summoned back from Turin suddenly, and, of course, being in Paris, I came down here as soon as possible. I find, however, the château deserted except by you—you solitary hermit. When did they go to Paris, Albert?"

"Only yesterday morning. You have just missed each other; what a pity! But you won't go back just yet, Raoul, will you? I am so dull here now, and you will have so much to tell me of all that you have been doing these two years past. How well you look, Raoul, only so brown, and let me see—older—yes, certainly older. You don't carry your years so well as you ought to do, in my opinion at least."

Raoul de Verdreuil laughed carelessly. "I suppose not, but what does it matter after all? Besides, you see me at a disadvantage. I have been travelling all night, and have not even waited to remove the stains and dust of my long journey before coming to see you. That reminds me, though, I have not been

able to get a good look at you yet ; just come out of that shadowy corner now, and let me see what these two years have done for you."

Albert laughed and obeyed, colouring still with the old boyish bashfulness, as the searching eyes of his friend met his own. He was changed, Raoul saw ; taller certainly, but the slight figure had still the same delicate, shrinking appearance that was so inexpressibly painful to him ; he would have liked to see it with more vigour, more strength apparent in its youthful proportions ; but the face was still the same frank, guileless face as of old, only the smooth brow bore now many lines of care, and the clear deep-blue eyes had the faint shadow of pain or longing in their depths. What had changed him ? Involuntarily Raoul's hand tightened its grasp on his shoulder, and his eyes looked pained as he spoke out his thoughts.

"Albert, this won't do ; either you have been working too hard or something has been troubling you, and you have kept it from me. Tell me, what is it ?"

The face before him flushed a hot dusky red, and for the first time in his life Albert answered his friend pettishly, almost angrily,—

"What absurd nonsense, Raoul ! nothing of the kind has happened. I assure you I am perfectly well and happy, and, as far as work is concerned, I have been very lazy the last twelve months. I have scarcely written anything."

Raoul de Verdreuil shook his head. "You can't deceive me, so don't try ; but I don't wish to force your confidence ; you shall tell me just what you please about yourself, and I will ask no more questions. Now let me go and make myself a more presentable figure, and then we will have a stroll through the park after lunch is over. I confess my journey has given me an appetite."

So, lightly turning the conversation off, he passed his arm through that of his friend, and they left the room together ; but Raoul felt hurt at this first restraint—this first appearance of withheld confidence on the part of Albert. It was so new, so unusual for the boy to be in any way reserved or cold to *him*, and in his heart crept a faint anger—a sudden indignation as he whispered to himself this change was the work of a woman—the woman who had come between him and his friend's love—whose power was now greater than his own. But he would not let Albert see how pained and hurt he was ; he chatted and laughed so gaily and freely that no suspicion entered the boy's mind of the real cause of that assumed gaiety ; far less did the thought cross him that those few impatient words had bared to Raoul's eyes the secret of his own changed looks, his restless, feverish

manner, his sudden fits of depression at one moment, alternating with the forced and unnatural merriment he assumed at other times.

They talked of many things—of Raoul's travels, of the countries he had visited, the sights he had seen ; but of one subject Albert would not speak, and that was of Vivienne St. Maurice ; he was so shy and reticent about her, that his friend hardly liked to press his own curiosity on his notice, though he longed to hear about the new inmate of the château.

All through that afternoon, while they strolled through the park and visited all the old familiar spots they both had loved since their boyhood, Albert evidently avoided any but the merest allusions to Vivienne. He talked freely enough of the countess and her increasing love of gaiety and amusement ; her dislike to anything in the shape of quiet or retirement ; of how, when she was not in Paris, the château was always filled with guests ; and her extravagance and recklessness were the theme of wonder to the whole country round.

A dark shadow rested on Raoul's brow as he listened to this, and his lips curled with mingled scorn and contempt.

"I wonder my father allows it," he said bitterly ; "surely he has still some authority in his own hands, and such a life can scarcely be pleasant to him now. Do you know, Albert," he continued sadly, "that during these two years of absence I have only heard from him once ? and he used to write to me so often before—before this marriage."

"I think you ought to look after your own interests more than you do, Raoul," said his friend ; "I have heard more than one of the visitors here remark on your long, strange absence, and say, too, how great an influence the countess is acquiring over her husband ; and I wish you would remember too, Raoul, how much power is vested in your father's hands—how a wily and skilful enemy could injure you. When you see the count again, you will be able to understand my meaning better. He is more infatuated about his wife, more blind to her faults than ever ; his mind is not so clear, nor his health so good as they were two years ago, and I think, if I were you, Raoul, I would not leave Renonçeux again for so long as you have just done."

"It seems to me, *mon cher*, that you have managed to pick up some worldly wisdom too, in these years of my absence," said Raoul, laughing a little, though the anxiety in his eyes deepened at the words he had heard ; "however,"—he went on speaking more earnestly now—"however, it appears to me that it is indeed necessary to see for myself how the land lies ; and I think, after resting here a day or two, I shall go up to Paris and pay my respects to the fair countess, while I keep my

eyes open to her tactics at the same time. And has she taken this *protégée* of hers up with her too?"

"Mademoiselle St. Maurice has gone for the first time to Paris," said Albert, flushing like a girl, in spite of his efforts at self-control. "The countess is going to introduce her, I believe. She has been talking about doing so for the last twelve months; but Vivienne did not seem to care about it; however, at last she went, and—"

"Is now fascinating all Paris, I suppose?" interrupted Raoul, smiling. "But what a wonderful young lady she must be *not to care about* the delights of the great world! I thought all girls were, as a rule, quite elated at the bare idea of mixing with all the follies and gaieties of social life—of tasting the glories of conquests and the sweets of dissipation."

"Oh! but Vivienne is so unlike all other girls," cried Albert eagerly, his tongue at last unloosed on this delicious subject, and his previous restraint and bashfulness forgotten in his desire to proclaim the marvellous perfections of his divinity. "She is so coy and proud, so lovely, yet so perfectly unconscious of her loveliness; so gifted, yet so humble in her opinion of her own genius. I think, in the whole world, there lives not another woman who could equal Vivienne St. Maurice."

"You make me feel quite anxious to see this wonder of the nineteenth century," said Raoul, subduing his mocking tones out of consideration for Albert's enthusiasm. "A girl who is beautiful, yet not vain; gifted, yet humble; shy, yet proud; poor and of no pretensions, yet graceful and dignified as any aristocrat in the world of fashion; truly she must be a marvel, Albert, if she is all you say she is."

"I cannot say one half of it," cried Albert, with a strange, sudden despair in his glad young voice, "I can only worship her as the fairest vision that ever haunted a poet's dreams, or made the world below the Elysium they have painted it."

Raoul was silent for a moment; then he turned to his friend with the old, caressing grace, so sweet and rare with him.

"Dear Albert! if, indeed, she be all this, I shall not grudge her your love, although I look upon her as my first rival in your heart now."

The fair boyish face coloured with glad surprise, and the blue eyes, so clear and guileless in their happy youth, looked up as lovingly as ever at the dark grave face above them.

"No one could rival *you*, Raoul; surely you know that without my telling it. It is true this new love has crept upon me unawares; how, I cannot say, but I keep it a secret from all; from *her* most of all: for she does not even guess its existence."

“If you have not told her, she certainly cannot know ; but it seems to me, Albert, that her very reluctance to go to Paris shows there was some strong attraction at Renonçeux, and what could *that* be but yourself ?”

Albert shook his head.

“We will not speak of it any more, Raoul,” he said sadly ; “I do not think it interests you, and it pains me a little.”

A little ! There was sharpest torture in Vivienne’s name now—now that she had gone from his side, and he could only picture her lovely and courted and happy, dazzling all eyes—bewildering all hearts as she had dazzled and bewildered his—the centre of every gaiety and pleasure that could fascinate and draw her heart from its quiet, peaceful memories of *him*, from the solitude and penance he was enduring from day to day—the solitude born of his own vain love and her absence.

“It *does* interest me,” said Raoul gently ; “pray don’t think that because I have so often mocked at love and called it folly, that I cannot feel for you now. But believe me, Albert, you despair too soon ; you have kept your feelings a close secret, and yet you fancy the girl does not return them. You must be a bolder wooer if you wish to win a woman’s heart. You will see, if I am not mistaken very much, that Vivienne will come back to Renonçeux unharmed by the gay world after all, and true to her first champion still. Absence is the truest test of love, you know, and absence will teach her the value of a love and a heart so loyal and steadfast as yours, Albert.”

Albert looked up with such fervent hope in his eyes, that Raoul felt more than repaid for his words, though they were spoken more to cheer his friend than because he himself believed them. The ice once broken, however, Albert forgot his reticence and even his unwillingness to discuss the subject, and poured out his love-tale from beginning to end in Raoul’s ears. To any one else Raoul would have listened with ill-concealed impatience, and no small amount of scorn ; but to Albert he gave such patient attention, such perfect sympathy as could only spring from friendship long and close and true as that friendship of theirs had been, as could only exist with love that loves *at all times*—the love of one man for another, when “it passes the love of women.”

Such friendships are rare indeed ; but when they exist they form a bond so close, so deep, that neither trial, nor absence, nor death itself can ever again unsever it.

The hours passed swiftly enough now all coldness and restraint had vanished, and the old brotherly cordiality revived again, undisturbed by any doubts, unshadowed by any clouds,

and the cheery words of his friend made the young artist's heart more hopeful, and taught him to look with braver trust and manlier courage into the future before him.

Day after day passed, and still Raoul de Verdreuil lingered at Renonçaux. Albert clung to him so eagerly, and shrank with such evident pain from the idea of his leaving him to his solitude again, that he stayed on until days lapsed into weeks, and the visit to Paris was still postponed. One day Albert met him with a face of eager delight and intense excitement.

"Look here, Raoul," he said; "Vivienne has written to me at last! such a long, delightful letter! but you shall read it yourself if you please; and you are right, really right, Raoul. She does not forget Renonçaux; she thinks of it always. Amidst the gaiety and pleasure and constant excitement of her new life—amidst all the wonder and delights of Paris—she says, 'Ah, Albert, I was happier in the dear old music-room with you than I am now!'"

"Oh, 'young lord lover,' how foolish you are!" said Raoul, laughing at his excitement. "No, don't offer it to me; those pages of enchantment, as you deem them, are simply four closely-written sheets of feminine caligraphy which I don't care about deciphering at present. I would rather have my breakfast, shocking as the confession appears; but I won't object to your telling me as much as you please about your inamorata's confessions, if it's any relief to your feelings to do so—only spare me the tender bits, there's a good fellow! Now fire away!"

"Really, Raoul, you are too bad," said his friend, half-laughing; "I have a great mind not to tell you anything about the letter at all; it will just serve you right."

"It won't distress me very much, I fear," said Raoul philosophically; "women's letters are all very much alike, I know. Read me the postscript, though; that's sure to be something worth hearing."

"There *isn't* one," said Albert triumphantly; "I told you she was different from most girls; am I not right?"

"You're joking, I know," said Raoul, proceeding with his breakfast in his usual leisurely fashion; "a woman write a letter without a P.S.! Impossible!"

"For most women, perhaps," said Albert, proud that his divinity had not even one failing for Raoul to discover as yet. "But she tells me in this last page—"

"You're sure it's not in the P.S.?" interrupted Raoul.

"No, you unbeliever, you may look for yourself if you like. She tells me here that the countess is going to give a costume ball or masked ball at her hotel, half the *elite* of Paris will be there. There has been a grand debate on the subject of costumes, and Vivienne is going to appear as 'Elaine.'"

"Why not her namesake, 'Vivien the Enchantress'?" said Raoul carelessly. "I'll be bound she would work her spells on many a Merlin there before the evening was over."

"Oh, Raoul!" cried Albert, pained and shocked at such irreverent mention of his lady-love, "how can you suggest such a character for one so young and innocent as Vivienne? If you were only to see her *once*, you would know how impossible—"

"It would be for me to fall in love with her—eh, Albert? Yes, dear old fellow, I know all that. We won't have the rhapsodies just yet, please. Go on with the letter."

"It does interest you for all your mockery, I see," said Albert, beginning to peruse his precious document again. "Where was I? Oh, I see! 'Elaine.' Well, she says, 'The Countess de Verdreuil decided on this, and she is going to appear as Guinevere'"—("Trust Blanche for making the most of herself," growled Raoul in an undertone)—"and she wishes the count to be King Arthur.'"

"Now, by Jove! this is too bad," cried Raoul, springing to his feet; "making my father go in for all this mummery at his time of life. What can the woman be thinking of? My dear boy," he continued more calmly, "I shall have to go to Paris and look after him myself. Masked balls at seventy years of age! Why, she will want him to dance a hornpipe for her guests' amusement next. Well, what more foolery follows this?"

"The countess thought it would be a good idea to have the whole of King Arthur's court represented," continued Albert, reading on, "so we shall have Sir Tristram and Sir Bedivere, and Galahad and Percival, and Lancelot du Lac, who is to be impersonated by the Marquis d'Orvâl, the reigning star of fashion here, as Blanche is always informing me, and in my opinion one of the most conceited and effeminate dandies in all Paris. His anxiety about his costume was worthy of any woman, and he and Blanche took three days to agree about it. What do you think it is to be? A baldric (whatever that may be) of black velvet studded with gold and gems, chain armour, and mantle of cloth of gold, fastened on one shoulder; a shield—blank—and a helmet encrusted with gold and precious stones. This is considered the appropriate costume for this valiant and far-famed knight. He is very handsome, this Marquis d'Orvâl, and I daresay will look very well. I asked him if he did not think it would be inconvenient to dance in his warlike garb of shield and helmet and breastplate, but he said he would of course lay aside these appendages then; still I think the mantle will be in his way, unless he persuades his partner to envelope herself in its cumbersome folds. How funny that would look, wouldn't it?"

"Well, any more?" asked Raoul, as Albert paused and looked up.

"I thought you would not care to hear it," said Albert a little mischievously.

"Oh! now we come to sentiment, I suppose? Well, you can miss that and go on to the next paragraph. Does she say when this ball is to come off?"

"No. Stay—yes; here is some more about it again: 'The *bal masqué* is to take place on the 25th—that's three days from this, Raoul—' and I am looking forward to it eagerly, as it will be my *first*. I have only been to the opera and to two or three quiet parties as yet, but I am to *come out really* on this occasion. I wish you could see my dress, Albert. But there, I don't suppose you would understand it if you did. I will only tell you it is pure white entirely, and my only ornaments will be white flowers. Shall I look like the "lily maid," do you think?"

"There stop, for goodness' sake," cried Raoul. "Spare me all those feminine hints about dress. Your ideal is very human and very like a woman after all; those last sentences were as good as a P.S."

Albert folded up his letter and put it carefully away in the breast-pocket of his velvet morning coat.

"Laugh away as much as you like now," he said composedly. "As long as she has not forgotten me, I don't mind your making fun of us."

"And I haven't time to do it either," said Raoul, rising from the table. "Now to study these trains out. Just ring the bell for me Albert, and tell Felix to pack my valise. I must be off to Paris by the next train. I suppose you won't come with me?"

"No," he answered half-doubtfully, half-shrinkingly, as though the suggestion pleased and pained him at one and the same moment. "No; I think not, Raoul, much as I should like it for some things; perhaps it is best for me to stay here. Shall you stop long?"

"It all depends on how I find things going on," said Raoul, turning to give his instructions to the servant who just entered.

"I suppose you'll see me off, Albert?" he continued presently, as the man left the room to prepare the carriage, and, receiving a ready affirmation, he went off to hasten the preparations for his instant departure. A very short time elapsed before both the young men were driving rapidly down to the station a mile distant from the château; and in a few minutes from the time of his arrival there, Raoul was whirling off to Paris as fast as the train could take him. There was a look of suppressed excitement on his face very unusual for it to wear, and he laughed once outright, as if some inward thought amused him.

"A capital plan!" he said half-aloud in the solitude of his

compartment. "Not much time to manage it, though. I must remember the costume exactly. Black velvet, cloth of gold, helmet, and shield. Ha! ha! it will be a comedy in real life, and enable me to penetrate into certain little mysteries as well;" and he leant back on the seat and gave vent to a burst of hearty and genuine laughter.

The train dashed on through fair bright villages, past budding vineyards, and blossoming orchards, never stopping on its way to the great capital; and Raoul de Verdreuil, scarcely noting the beauty of the fair spring landscape around, only stretched himself full length on his carriage-seat, and dwelt thoughtfully on a plan which he had decided upon executing—a plan fired in his brain by a few chance words in Vivienne St. Maurice's letter.

CHAPTER IV

THE "BAL MASQUÉ."

"The sun has set,
And in the lighted halls the guests are met;
The beautiful look'd lovelier in the light
Of love and admiration and delight.
... How many meet who never yet have met,
To part too soon, but never to forget.
How many saw the beauty, power, and wit
Of looks and words which ne'er enchanted yet."

Shelley.

"Of course you are going to the *bal masqué* to-night, D'Orvâl?"

The speaker, a dashing young *attaché*, had just finished a last game of *écarté* with the *marquis*; and now, under the glitter of light and warmth which shone on all the luxuries and elegance, the mirrors and consoles, the dazzling array of silver and glass in D'Orvâl's sumptuous rooms, they sat smoking and chatting together of all the social and political *affaires* then interesting the Parisian world.

"Oh, yes; that's a long-standing promise of mine," answered D'Orvâl, as he languidly wiped his long sweeping moustaches after a draught of *Chambertin*; "but that needn't hurry you off, Clermont. There's plenty of time before I start to finish our discussion."

“The ‘new beauty’ is to come out to-night, isn’t she?” pursued Clermont. “I believe you have seen her pretty frequently, D’Orvâl, but we less fortunate mortals have only been tantalized by chance glimpses now and then. I suppose the countess wants to enhance the value of her ward by giving her the additional attraction of inaccessibility. However, I have heard so much about her that I almost wish I was going to-night to judge of her charms for myself. I have only seen her at a distance hitherto.”

“Come with me, if you like,” said D’Orvâl; “I am sufficiently *ami de la maison* to bring any one I choose.”

“But every one is to go in costume, and I have nothing ready,” said the attaché; “and I have two other balls to appear at to-night—places where I *must* go. No, D’Orvâl, I fear I must decline your offer, tempting as it is. But that reminds me what is your dress to be—is it a secret?”

“Well, it was till *now*,” said the marquis, “but as the time’s up, I don’t mind telling you. I am going to have the most original costume of the evening, Clermont; there won’t be another like it—I know that for a fact.”

(“Like your confounded conceit to think so,” thought Victor Clermont to himself). “Well, and what’s this wonderful costume to be?” he asked aloud.

“That of Sir Lancelot du Lac, King Arthur’s famous knight,” was the answer. “My costumier declared that there would not be such another dress in all Paris, and I made him solemnly promise not to describe it to any one.”

“But what’s it to be such a secret for?” asked his friend; “you’re not going to meet a band of conspirators in Blanche de Verdreuil’s salons, are you?”

“Now, don’t be absurd, Victor; of course not; but we are all to be masked till supper time, and of course I don’t want every one to know who I am.”

“Except Blanche herself, or the lovely ward; which is the attraction, eh, D’Orvâl, or is that a secret too?”

“Women have deuced little attraction for *me*,” said the marquis, rising, and glancing conceitedly at his handsome figure in the opposite mirror. “No—you needn’t leave yet, Victor. I must go and dress, but Willoughby and Sainte-Claire will be here directly, and they’ll keep you company for half an hour.”

“Very well, then, I’ll wait and see you adorned for the fray—for it won’t be armed, I suppose?” said Victor Clermont, laughing, and settling himself comfortably back in his chair again, when he devoted himself to his cigar and a new novel, till the entrance of two of D’Orvâl’s friends who were to accompany him to the ball disturbed his solitude for the time.

"Look ! here comes our peerless knight," cried the Vicomte Sainte-Claire as D'Orvâl entered at last. "By Jove, Léon, you look the character to the life. What a magnificent get up !"

"He says there won't be another like it there to-night," said Victor Clermont. "I believe you're right, too, D'Orvâl. It does you infinite credit. But now I suppose I must be off to take my turn at the treadmill. How it all bores one after the first season to be sure !"

"True enough, but what would those poor women do without us ?" said D'Orvâl conceitedly. "Of course it's only for their sakes we sacrifice our own inclinations so continually. They ought to be much more grateful than they are. I'm sure."

"Society expects every man to do his duty," said Liouel Willoughby, who belonged to the British Legation, and as a rule was out every night of his life, and attended half a dozen balls in an evening ; "and precious stiff work the duty is, generally speaking. Well, D'Orvâl, I see you are growing impatient, so we'll be off. *Au revoir, mon ami*," he said, turning to Clermont ; "I go to attend our peerless knight to fields of conquests and of victory. I wonder who is to number the slain, though, Léon !" he added, laughing, as he followed D'Orvâl down the broad staircase to his carriage. "How many Elaines will languish and pine away from this night forward, do you think !"

The face of the young marquis flushed a dusky red, and he turned hastily aside to give some directions to his servants without vouchsafing any answer. Did he think of the "Elaine" he was so soon to meet—the beautiful girl who had already piqued and fascinated him more than any woman he had ever seen ?

Whether he thought of her or not, his manner was unusually *distracted* and absent during the drive to the Countess de Verdreuil's hotel in the Fanbourg St. Germain ; and when he at last alighted there and entered the magnificent salons where Blanche had assembled half the wealth and rank of Paris to grace her ball, his first glance was not for Guinevere, but Elaine.

It was already late, and the rooms were crowded with maskers in every gay and fanciful costume imaginable.

Kings, queens, knights, pages ; flower-girls, peasants—every nationality and every rank in life seemed represented there. Dominoes of every colour, glittering with jewels and spangled with gold and silver, shone in an incessant dazzling array, and amidst the blaze of light, the gleam of jewels, the flitter of bright-hued ribbons, the glow of rare flowers, the marquis looked in vain for the pure white robes and exquisite form of Vivienne St. Maurice.

In all that crowd, laughing, jesting—waylaying him every moment and arresting his steps at every turn, his progress was necessarily slow, and some time elapsed before he could make his way to the Countess De Verdreuil's side. Taking advantage of her position as hostess, and prompted as much by vanity as anything else, Blanche wore no mask; and when the marquis reached her she was in one of the smaller reception-rooms, surrounded by a crowd of admirers, all bending towards her with the homage and flattery she loved so well, and never wearied of inspiring.

Lovely as Blanche was, she had never appeared to greater advantage than on this night, and D'Orv  l paused a moment ere he spoke to her, as if taking in the whole faultless perfection of face and figure, set off as they were by the exquisite hues of her dress.

The glittering masses of her hair, the soft rose-flush of excitement on her cheek, the languid lustre of her eyes—all made her dangerously lovely at that moment; and when she turned and greeted the marquis (whom she recognised immediately by his dress) with a shower of playful railleury for his late attendance on his liege lady, he forgot the object of his search for the time being, and lingered beside her instead.

Presently, however, growing weary of the whispers and mockery and repartee around, he bent down to Blanche and asked where Vivienne was.

"Dancing, I believe," was the careless answer. "She has hardly been beside me a moment the whole evening. But if you wish to claim her, monsieur, you will soon be able to find her, as, like myself, she is unmasked. I wish you would bring her back, in fact, as, now that you have arrived, I wish to arrange that costume quadrille we agreed upon."

The marquis was in no way unwilling to depart on his quest, having first, however, as in duty bound, engaged the countess as his partner in the forthcoming dance. Then he once more took his way through the crowd of dominoes, violet and grey, rose and black, amber and blue and scarlet, searching among them all for that pure white dress of the Lily Maid of Astolat, yet still unsuccessful in his endeavours to find it or its fair wearer.

Meanwhile Vivienne St. Maurice had entered upon this the first real gaiety of her life with feelings of unalloyed delight and intense excitement. It seemed to her more like a scene in fairyland than anything in real life. The blaze of light, the moving kaleidoscope of colour, the infinite variety of costume, the dazzling array of jewels, and fluttering rosettes, and bright eyes gleaming through the envious masks—all combined to make

a picture at once bewildering and enchanting. As she stood leaning on her partner's arm in the pause of a waltz she had been dancing, there were few who could help gazing at the fair guileless face, so naive and innocent, so thoroughly incapable of hiding its own pleasure and enjoyment in the scene around.

She was beset on all sides by claims on her attention, by entreaties for every dance; and she answered them all with such exquisite grace, such serene unconsciousness of her own unsurpassed attractions, that it was no wonder if even calm, astute men, habituated to every description of female loveliness, felt that in her presence there was a charm more piquant and irresistible, than in the finished graces and polished wit of women of the world. It was the charm of innocence, the unsullied purity of a sweet and shadowless youth with the dawning consciousness of womanhood just touching it into graver thoughts and deeper earnestness.

At the conclusion of one of the dances Vivienne became conscious of the close and eager scrutiny of a masker leaning negligently against the archway of the dancing-saloon. Locking at him again as she passed, she recognised the costume of the Marquis D'Orvâl. The velvet suit, the armour like a network of finest silver, the mantle of cloth of gold, the shining helmet—yes, she could not be mistaken; and as the dark eyes gleamed through the velvet mask and met her own, she saw the recognition in their gaze, and acknowledged his low and reverential bow with a graceful bend of her head.

Evidently encouraged by her salute, the knight advanced, and in low and eager tones besought her to dance with him. Vivienne hesitated for a moment, and then remembering she had promised him the first dance for which he asked on this evening, she accepted his proffered arm, and they both returned to the ball-room again.

"You are a late arrival, monsieur," said Vivienne presently. "I thought you would have been here long ago."

"I was detained unexpectedly," he answered; and something in the voice struck Vivienne as being unfamiliar, for she turned and looked scrutinizingly at her companion.

"Oh, indeed!" she said carelessly; "was your costumier unpunctual after all? I must really congratulate you on the success of your instructions to him, monsieur; the idea has been carried out remarkably well."

"Do you think so?" he said; and Vivienne wondered again that the complacent self-satisfied tones of the conceited young marquis could be so careless and indifferent on a subject which had hitherto appeared so all-important. "I am glad it pleases you, Mademoiselle St. Maurice; and how comes it you wear

no mask to-night? I thought it was compulsory on every guest?"

"Yes, but the countess and myself are exempt from the necessity," said Vivienne. "You know, monsieur, as this is her ball, she thought she could not very well receive her guests masked, and so she made me appear without one also; but I mean to wear mine presently. I think it must be so much more amusing; and I have gone through all the necessary introductions now."

"Mask yourself before we dance," said her companion eagerly. "Do, mademoiselle; you will not have to bear the scrutiny of these innumerable pairs of eyes around you."

"Very well," said Vivienne, laughing; "but I must go into this anteroom, monsieur, to adjust it. Will you wait for me?"

"Certainly," he said, in those low, courteous tones which puzzled Vivienne. They were so different to the languid utterances of the Marquis d'Orvâl generally.

"I suppose, though, he has a different manner in society; and he has no one to whom he can show off his airs and graces just now," she said to herself as she passed into a small anteroom, which was completely deserted now. She adjusted her mask, laughing a little at the extraordinary change it made in her appearance.

"What a pity my dress is so well known!" she thought, as she looked at herself before leaving the room. "It would be ever so much nicer if no one could tell who I was. Oh! what is this?" she exclaimed half aloud, as she saw lying on a couch near her a sky-blue domino embroidered with silver. "I have a great mind to put this on for a little while. I wonder if Blanche will be very angry with me?" She paused doubtfully; then with a merry laugh she seized the domino, and in another instant was transformed from her original appearance entirely.

"I'm afraid it's naughty of me," she thought, still smiling at the transformation, "but it will be such fun; even Blanche won't know me now, and I can soon take it off and put it back here again when I've done with it." So, hesitating no longer, she left the room, and joined the knight, who was waiting for her outside the door.

"I wonder if he will recognise me?" she said; "I think I shall try. I will speak to him in Italian."

"Alone and solitary, Sir Knight?" she said, in the liquid tones of her native tongue. "What do you in silent thought amidst a scene so gay?"

He started slightly, and answered abstractedly. "I am waiting for my liege lady to appear. I have sworn attendance

upon her for this night, and therefore the scene has no attractions without her presence."

A laugh, so sweet and clear and musical, fell on his ears, that he looked at his companion in astonishment.

"Don't you know me, Monsieur le Marquis?" she said; "I really did not think I could deceive you so easily."

"Elaine herself, transformed into a new character!" he exclaimed, offering her his arm, and smiling at her evident enjoyment of the trick. "You did it very well, mademoiselle; I never suspected you for a moment."

"I hope the countess won't be angry with me," said Vivienne more gravely. "But every one knows my dress by this time, and I wanted to be *inconnue* for a little while, like every one else. If she scolds me, monsieur, you must take my part and make my excuses. I feel in such wild spirits to-night, that I really cannot keep in remembrance all the instructions she gave me about my behaviour."

"Surely she might have trusted your own sense and judgment more," said her companion; "I do not think Mademoiselle St. Maurice would ever transgress any code of social observance."

"Ah, you don't know me, you see!" she answered, shaking her head with a pretty gravity that made him smile. "I assure you monsieur, if I had my way, I should transgress all these odious rules and *convenances*, which I am so weary of hearing about, every moment—I should indeed. I like to have perfect freedom of thought and action—to do just what I please the moment I want to do it, without stopping to think what every one will say *if I do it*. You are very much shocked, are you not? None of your modern young ladies, fresh from their convent walls, and regulating all their words and actions by the rules laid down for them, would ever proclaim such sentiments as these, would they?"

"I suppose not," said her companion.

"Don't say *suppose*," she exclaimed half pettishly; "you know it very well, only you don't like to tell me so. I wish I could find any one who would speak out exactly what they thought, and not clothe it in ambiguous phrases; but I suppose that's not one of the rules laid down in your great world, is it, Monsieur d'Orvâl?"

"Indeed, no," he said gravely. "I hardly think it would do either, mademoiselle. We should always be quarrelling with each other, and offending each other irrevocably. You would find that out very soon."

"I should not care," she answered, turning her eyes, as soft and liquid as a child's, to meet his own as they flashed through his mask. "If I *offended* any one by speaking the truth, I should think they must be very weak and foolish, and scarcely worth the trouble of telling it to."

"A sweeping denunciation!" he said lightly. "Should you like every one to speak the exact truth to you, mademoiselle; *always*, even when they told you what they thought of you?"

"Of course I should," she answered, looking at him again with those serene, child-like eyes, so shadowless and calm as yet, so innocent of any concealment, so devoid of any fear.

"The tale would be too flattering, even then," he said gently. "Ah, mademoiselle! you are right; truth could never harm or offend you—you have nothing to fear from it; but there are few, if any, in the world around to whom it would be either welcome or pleasant, and therefore it has gradually become extinct in fashionable life, and is tabooed from polite circles as an undesirable acquaintance. But we must take our places now, mademoiselle; the music has begun.

During the dance there was little opportunity for conversation, but when it was over the knight and his companion joined the crowd of promenaders, and Vivienne had the pleasure of seeing the effect of her disguise, as she escaped all the scrutiny and attention to which she had been hitherto subjected.

"You think balls very enjoyable, do you not?" said her companion presently; "a fairyland of enjoyment, where all the mirth is innocent, and all the pleasure real; where no such things as heart-aches and sorrows, passions or intrigues, dare show themselves; where pleasure reigns alone; where the roses bloom with no canker at their core, and fair faces smile with no secret gnawing at their hearts? Am I not right?"

"I do think so to-night," she said softly. "Don't destroy the illusion, if it is one, by any cynical observations. I shall learn the real nature of these things soon enough, I suppose; but it is very pleasant to look on them now and believe every one is as happy as they seem."

"How I envy you!" he said softly. "I would give a great deal to be able to feel the same—to look upon life with that freshness of feeling, that child-like belief, which never dreams of the evil below the surface—of the canker at the core of all such pleasures as these."

"You speak very gloomily," said Vivienne, laughing gaily in her own innocent mirth and thorough disbelief of what he said. "For such a votary of fashion as yourself to give vent to such sentiments as these seems to me like rank heresy. Why do you pursue these pleasures so untiringly, if your real opinion of them is what you have just declared? Your conduct and ideas seem to me strikingly inconsistent, Monsieur d'Orvâl."

"I do not pursue them untiringly, I assure you," he said, speaking very earnestly. "I have long been weary of them, and long avoided them; but still there are times when one is bound

to pay some respect to the demands of society, and the sacrifice to inclination in these instances is in no way atoned for by the enjoyment derived."

"I could never have believed these were your real sentiments," said Vivienne, her voice growing puzzled, and her eyes looking wonderingly at the masked face beside her. Was this—yes, surely *it must be*—the Marquis d'Orvâl? and yet how different he was to-night from all she had ever believed him to be! His languor, his affectation, his conceit, were all laid aside; he had not paid her a single compliment, nor given vent to that strain of flattery, which had so wearied and annoyed her before, whenever she had been in his society.

"Could you not?" he said, laughing carelessly. "Ah, mademoiselle! don't you know we all wear two faces—one for the world, one for ourselves? If I have laid aside the first for your sake, it is because I knew you would prefer truth to falsehood, and I can afford to let you know me as I am without fear of incurring your mockery, or lowering myself in your esteem."

"I think it is a great pity you ever wear another," said Vivienne, with a naive unconsciousness of the flattery in her own words. "Why should you take the trouble of making every one believe you different from what you *really* are? To me it is incomprehensible. The true character is always preferable to the false, and I should think you were paying society a very poor compliment by assuming one so different, and in every way so far below your own."

"You prefer the Marquis d'Orvâl as you have found him to-night, then, to the same individual he has seemed on other occasions?" inquired her companion.

The laughing eyes glanced mischievously up at him through the velvet mask.

"Don't try and make me pay compliments, Monsieur d'Orvâl; that is a province entirely your own, and one I have no wish to take from you," she said. "I am not going to tell you which I prefer: I leave that for your own ingenuity to discover."

Her companion was silent for a few moments; then he said suddenly,—

"Will you honour me with another waltz, mademoiselle, or am I asking too great a favour of you?"

"I will give you the next," she said, carelessly; "but there are two more dances between it."

"Will you not like to rest here a little while, then?" he asked as they neared the conservatories. "How delightfully cool and beautiful they look after the heat and noise of the rooms, do they not?"

"They do indeed," she said, drawing her hand from his arm

as she spoke, and wandering idly along through the beautiful groups of flowers and blossoming shrubs around. "I love flowers so dearly," she added suddenly, as she bent down over a cluster of scarlet blossoms near her. "They always remind me of my old home—my beautiful, sunny Italy. These flowers we have here, though, are not nearly so fine as those in the conservatories at Renonçeux. Have you ever been there, monsieur? Oh! of course not; I remember your telling me that when I first met you. It is such a lovely place; I wish you knew it."

"Why?" he asked quietly.

"Oh, because then I could talk to you about it, of course, and you would be able to understand my enthusiasm, whereas now the subject won't interest you at all."

"Oh, you are mistaken, I assure you," he said eagerly, while he thought to himself how perfectly lovely were those eyes of hers when lit up by real feeling. "It would interest me greatly to hear about the château. Have you lived there long?"

"Two years," she said gravely. "The Countess de Verdreuil constituted herself my sole guardian and protectress on the death of my only friend; since then I have lived with her entirely."

"And do you prefer the new life to the old?" he asked gently.

She shook her head, while wistful, dreamy shadows deepened in her eyes.

"It is happier in one way," she answered at length. "I suppose I ought to assert that I do prefer it, without an instant's hesitation: but I am faithful to old friends and old memories, monsieur, and I have lost one thing I dearly love by this exchange, and that is—"

"What?" he asked, as she hesitated.

"Surely you know," she said, flashing her bright, beautiful eyes up at him as he stood beside her; "what all seem to have but those who live in the purples, and steep their lives in the enervating luxuries of such a world as this—freedom!"

His eyes glanced from her to the long vista of light and splendour opening beyond—the dazzling array of gems and jewels, of gorgeous costumes and priceless dresses, while the far-off swell of the music sounded sweet and faint to his ears; from thence he looked again at her—the beautiful girlish figure leaning so gracefully there amidst the wealth of blossoms, the clustered flowers and gleaming statues.

"Are you, then, so fond of liberty?" he asked. "It is a dangerous thing for a woman. Believe me, they are safer and better hemmed in by care, and bound down by rules they dare

not infringe, than if there own will and their own pleasure were the sole laws they acknowledged. Besides," he continued, smiling, "if they lose liberty they gain what is worth far more—power."

"Power!" she said dreamily, as she turned and gazed down into the clear marble basin of a fountain near her. "What power? A brief one at best, and one where the intellect is ever subservient to external charms. Power! There is no real power a woman can wield in this world, because she dare not move from the beaten track—because she dare not infringe one of the terrible rules laid down for her by society—because in her youth she is hampered and trammelled by the guardianship of conventionality, and in maturity she has sunk her own individuality into that of another, and formed new bonds that fetter her even more than the old."

"So young and so wise," he answered, gazing half in surprise at the girl, whose head was bent so low he could not see those marvellous eyes which mirrored every feeling in her heart. "What a feminine paradox you are, mademoiselle! I feel strongly inclined to recant all my previous doctrines as regards women, and assign you the right of converting me to your own views."

She moved aside a little impatiently.

"Now you are relapsing into your old ways, monsieur, and I shall declare you have forfeited my good opinion as soon as it was gained. Are you going to relapse into your other self again—the one you informed me you kept for the world? If so, I must request you to take me back to the Countess de Verdreuil again."

The radiant eyes turned to his face half vexed, half laughing, and, meeting their gaze, he returned it with one of earnest, yet it seemed almost reluctant, admiration.

Then he spoke, but with a slight nervous hesitation in his clear ringing tones.

"Mademoiselle, are you very unforgiving, I wonder? Would your pardon be difficult to obtain for a transgression, a whim, only undertaken on a sudden impulse, and that not to gratify mere idle curiosity, but from a real earnest desire to convince myself of all I had previously heard?"

"What do you mean?" she said, startled and confused by his words, and speaking in a cold and dignified tone. "You speak in riddles, monsieur, and I confess I cannot understand your meaning."

"It is simply this," he said gently. "I fear all this time you have been taking me for some one else; you have addressed me by his name at all events, and I was unwilling to destroy the illusion just at once, and —"

"You have taken a very mean advantage of my ignorance, then," she said haughtily, "and one which I regret extremely. Am I to understand, then, that you are not the Marquis d'Orvâl? that you are, in fact, a stranger?"

"Yes."

He made no apology, offered no excuse, and the hot colour dyed the girl's face beneath her mask, and the beautiful eyes looked very indignant now.

"I suppose I ought to feel honoured by your entertaining yourself at my expense?" she said; "I only wonder I did not penetrate the deception sooner. However, monsieur, as the farce is over, perhaps you will kindly take me back to the Countess de Verdreuil?"

"You are not offended, are you?" he said earnestly. "Indeed, mademoiselle, I did not wish to take any advantage of your mistake, but you seemed so perfectly convinced that I was the Marquis d'Orvâl, that I could not resist keeping up the delusion a little while; and, after all, mademoiselle, the domino gives free permission for all such innocent deceptions as these. It is *laissez-faire, laissez-parler* from the moment you assume its disguise, and you have told me no secrets, and I have taken no other advantage of my success than to speak as any other stranger might have done."

"It was too bad," said Vivienne gravely; but in the very midst of her rebuke she gave vent to such a peal of merry, child-like laughter, that its infection caused her companion to join in it also.

"To think of my calling you Monsieur d'Orvâl!" she said suddenly; "and how well you kept it up, monsieur! Do people often make these sort of mistakes at masked balls?"

"Very often," he said, with a smile; "and they don't always end so harmlessly as ours, mademoiselle; but I hope you are not going to bear malice against me any longer; say you forgive me, and in token let me have that dance you promised."

"But I don't think I ought to dance with you after this," said Vivienne gravely, struggling with a dim sense of outraged propriety, and not at all sure whether her conduct was quite correct. "You see, monsieur, I have been all this time under the impression that you were somebody else, and now I don't know who you are at all."

"Never mind *that*," he said, laughing; "I am not an ogre, mademoiselle, and you need not be frightened about transgressing *les convenances*, considering you have confessed to me how little you cared for them. Come, let us have this waltz in token of your forgiveness."

He offered her his arm, and with a half-shy reluctance she

took it, and walked back with him through the maze of brilliant blossoms and marble pillars, and silver spray of falling fountains, to the ball-room where the first strains of the promised waltz were sounding ; and as she floated off into its graceful measure with that strong yet gentle arm clasping her dainty waist, Vivienne began to wonder dreamily who this stranger could be.

She was not aware that any hint of the Marquis d'Orvâl's costume had escaped, yet it could not have been copied so closely as this by chance alone ; and if this was not the true Sir Lancelot, where was he ?

In no room had she seen the duplicate of this masker, yet if the Marquis d'Orvâl were there he would be certain to be attired in a similar costume, or perhaps he had suddenly changed his mind and persuaded one of his friends to impersonate Sir Lancelot, and he would of course be in a dress unknown to her. Yes, this was the most probable suggestion of all, and, when the waltz was over, Vivienne had become so assured of her idea being the right one, that she gave a faint start of surprise as through the archway of the adjoining salon she saw the very double of her companion advancing towards them.

Height, figure, dress, all were so exactly alike that it was impossible to tell one from the other. Two Sir Lancelots had evidently chosen to appear at the ball, and both met now as the groups on either side parted and made way for the advancing form of the last arrival.

CHAPTER V.

DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND.

VIVIENNE ST. MAURICE watched the approach of the second Lancelot du Lac with feelings of unmixed amusement. She knew how the Marquis d'Orvâl had prided himself upon the originality of his idea as to his costume, and now he found that the carefully-guarded secret had leaked out in some way or other, for his own dress was copied to the utmost exactness, and the figure before him might have been taken for the reflection of his own.

However, he was too much a man of the world to betray his annoyance by any sign, and passed Vivienne and her companion with a haughty glance, flashed from the dark eyes which gleamed through his mask with angry fire and ill-concealed vexation.

For an instant Vivienne stood in expectation of his addressing her; but he passed on immediately, and only then did she remember her own change of costume, and the mask which concealed the upper part of her face, leaving only the chin and throat visible below.

"He does not know you," whispered her companion; "now, mademoiselle, remove your domino, and let me lead you back to the Countess de Verdreuil."

Vivienne obeyed immediately. She hastened to the anteroom before mentioned, and in three minutes came out again unmasked and in her original attire as the Lily Maid of Astolat. The unknown knight, about whose identity she was still puzzling herself, gave her his arm, and together they went back through the crowded rooms to the Countess de Verdreuil's side.

She greeted them with a pleased smile.

"How quick you have been, monsieur!" she said. "Now, Vivienne, since you are here, we will have that costume quadrille. I believe my whole court are present," she continued, looking round.

"All save the king himself," said the knight; then, as Vivienne released her hand, he whispered entreatingly, "Don't betray me yet, mademoiselle, I beg of you."

"The king?" said Blanche wonderingly; "what king?"

"King Arthur, of course," was the answer.

"Oh, my husband has long since retired," she said carelessly; "he did not feel well, and the heat and the noise were too much for him."

Then, giving the signal for the different couples to pair off, she laid her hand on the knight's arm, and they moved off to the dancing-salon.

It was just midnight, the hour agreed upon for the quadrille, and, the instant they appeared, the rest of the spectators stood in groups around to watch the royal party. The magnificent dresses of the knights and ladies were the object of universal admiration. There were Guinevere and Lancelot, Elaine and Percival, Tristram and Ysolde, and others too numerous to mention.

But the face of the Maid of Astolat outshone all others; and yet, perfect though the face was, it was not half so resistless as the charm of expression, which lit or shadowed it at intervals—the charm which lay in every glance of the lovely child-like eyes—in the smiles of the beautiful arched lips—in all the grace of movement and gesture which betrayed her southern origin. Even Blanche de Verdreuil's loveliness could not eclipse that of her ward, nor could the languor and nonchalance, the ease and dignity, the wit and brilliance which turn by turn gave their

sorcery to the one, vie with that rarer fascination of grace and purity and serene unconsciousness, which made the chief attraction of the other.

The one was a woman of the world—polished, brilliant, bewitching—the other had the guileless youth, the earnest truth, the shadowless purity of a mind and heart unsullied by taint of worldliness, or knowledge of evil.

The countess was somewhat surprised at her companion's addressing her in Italian, but she answered readily, imagining that he chose that language as it was not so well known to those around.

"I am sorry to hear the Count de Verdreuil is not well. His presence would have completed our court admirably," he said.

"Oh, there is nothing very serious the matter," said Blanche in the same careless, indifferent tones she had before used in speaking of her husband. "Paris never agrees with him—at least he says so—and yet he will not allow me to come by myself, and he cannot expect me to bury myself alive in that dismal chateau of his all the year round. It is *triste* enough to spend even three months there, and I am obliged to sacrifice so much of the year to oblige him ; but more than that I will not do, and I have managed to get my own way in that hitherto."

"You do not like Reconceux, then ?" said her companion ; "yet I hear it is such a charming place, madame."

"Oh, yes, it is well enough *now* ; I have modernized some of the rooms, and the gardens and conservatories ; and when I have plenty of guests staying with me it is very endurable for a month or two ; but I have no sylvan tastes, monsieur, and I always am happy to leave it."

"You have travelled a great deal, have you not ?" he questioned carelessly. "To one accustomed to a wandering life, with its constant change and excitement, any settled place of abode is never long endurable."

"I have travelled—yes," she answered, playing somewhat nervously with the flowers in her hand. "But not more than others, monsieur, in these days of rapid locomotion, when a tour round the world is nothing unusual."

"And do you prefer France to Italy ?" he asked.

She glanced quickly up.

"I never told you I had been in Italy," she said, losing for the first time the negligent self-possession of her ordinary manner.

"Did you not ? yet I certainly heard it ; if not from yourself, from some one else. Florence, I think, was the place mentioned."

A hot flush of colour passed over her face.

"It is long ago since I was in Italy; but, of course, I visited all the cities of any note during my stay. Which of your friends possesses a memory so excellent, monsieur?"

He laughed: "Oh, one hears so many things about people," he said carelessly, "that one hardly notices at the time. I cannot remember my authority at present, madame; but it cannot surely concern you to know who it was."

"Of course not," she said with ill-concealed nervousness; "only I was not aware any one would interest themselves about a thing so long past as my visit to Italy."

"A beautiful woman must ever pay the penalty of her beauty," he said, speaking low enough for her ears alone to catch the words. "Perhaps the faithfulness of a memory may not always be convenient to her, but, nevertheless, there are some faces that once seen are never *forgotten*."

What was there in the words to make the delicate face of Blanche de Verdreuil pale so suddenly? She alone knew.

"I also have been in Florence," he said carelessly in the next pause of the dance; "but more recently than yourself, of course. It was a few years ago, and the whole city was full of a terrible tragedy that had just been enacted there. Probably you have heard of it, madame?"

"I may have; one hears of so many terrible tragedies nowadays. What was this particular one, Monsieur d'Orvâl?"

Her voice was calm, but there was a defiant ring in its clear, rich tones that made a faint smile rise to the lips of her companion.

"It was the suicide of a gambler," he said, "whose house had been one of the most frequented in the city—a house where the play was notoriously high, and the luck notoriously uniform; though, strange to say, it never ran in favour of the guests themselves. Well, notice had reached the authorities of doings not strictly regular at this villa (let me see, what was the name?) oh! Villa Constanza, and they thought fit to pay it a visit. The night they came, this man, Count Lorenzo I think he called himself, was arrested, the whole contents of the villa seized, and it was found that all the dice were loaded, and that he had duplicate cards of every kind in his possession. When captured, the fellow coolly asked if he might help himself to a glass of water on a buffet near him, went up to it—but how pale you look, Madame de Verdreuil, I fear my story will be too tragic to please you."

"Oh, no, pray go on," she said, though her voice was nervous and hurried, and the hand which held her bouquet trembled visibly; "what was the end of this story?"

"Well, he went up to it, turned his back for a second on his

capturers, took a pistol from his coat, and shot himself through the heart—dead. The sensation this created was tremendous. His wife and a young girl—her niece, as she was popularly supposed to be—took advantage of the confusion and fled from the villa, bearing with them all the gold and valuables on which they could lay hands. They were both implicated in the business also, but managed to escape. In fact, the search for them was not a very long or careful one, and so they got off easily enough.”

“And is that all, monsieur?”

The question was asked in the same defiant voice as before, and by a strong effort Blanche de Verdreuil conquered her agitation. What was this story to her? Of course the Marquis D’Orvâl merely told it as an incident brought to his recollection by the mention of Italy—nothing more.

“That is all,” he said quietly. “I suppose you are thinking I have chosen a strange time and place for repeating a tale of this description, are you not, madame?”

“A ball-room is certainly not quite the place where one expects to hear such things,” she answered; “but if you have no more tragic events to relate, monsieur, allow me to ask—why, *who* is this?” she exclaimed, breaking suddenly off in her question, ‘Sir Lancelot du Lac again! How comes it, Monsieur d’Orvâl, that you have not preserved your secret better?”

“It is very strange,” he said in a tone of feigned annoyance; “but perhaps my rascal of a costumier has betrayed me. Certainly that individual yonder has copied my dress exactly. I wonder who he is, madame?”

The quadrille was just over now, and, standing watching its conclusion, with eyes of indignation and wrath, was the second knight, about whose identity Vivienne was the only one in possession of certain information at this moment. As the dancers ceased and mixed with the crowd of promenaders again, Blanche and her partner came near to him. With a rapid movement he bent to her, and exclaimed—

“How comes it, madame, that I have forfeited my right to your hand for this dance? I went to seek your ward, and, my search being unsuccessful, I returned to claim you, as previously agreed. I find that you have already supplied my place and forgotten your promise.”

“Pardon, monsieur,” exclaimed the countess in surprise; “there is some mistake. I promised to dance with Sir Lancelot du Lac, and I have done so. In making that promise it never occurred to me that there might be two knights of the same appearance, between whom it is impossible to distinguish. I have been all this time under the impression that I was dancing

with the Marquis d'Orvâl. Unless you both unmask, it is hardly possible to tell which of you is the gentleman in question."

"Madame is right, answered the marquis, now growing irate and indignant at the trick played upon him.

This quadrille was the event of the evening, and he had been left out of it altogether, when he had flattered himself that he would be the principal attraction. "It is only fair, monsieur," he continued, turning to his rival, "that the countess should be able to judge whether she has broken her promise or not. I am perfectly willing to assure her of *my* being the one to whom the promise was made; I suppose you are equally ready to convince her she has mistaken you for *me*?"

"I believe, Madame de Verdreuil, that we are all bound to remain masked until suppertime; was not that the rule you laid down for the evening?"

"Certainly," said Blanche, now growing seriously embarrassed between these conflicting claims.

"And I therefore assert my right to maintain my incognito till then; but since this gentleman considers I have deprived him of his dance, I resign all further pretensions to your hand, madame, and have the honour to leave you to his explanations."

And with a quiet bow he released her hand and turned away, leaving Blanche for once thoroughly bewildered.

"*Not the Marquis d'Orvâl?* Who can he be?" she thought, uneasily, "and how much does he know? Why did he persist in referring to Italy?"

Not being able to answer these questions satisfactorily, she turned to the real Marquis d'Orvâl, who was standing in silent indignation, gnawing his moustache, and inwardly wishing he could force this cool stranger to unmask then and there, that he might at least have the satisfaction of finding out who he was.

"*Eh bien*, monsieur, we are having some mysteries, are we not?" said Blanche lightly. "I really cannot be sure whether *you* are the Marquis d'Orvâl, after being deceived so easily just now. However, we must have patience a little longer, and then we can solve this riddle for our own satisfaction."

"I can assure you in this instance you are not mistaken in your surmises," said the knight, trying to subdue his offended tones into the usual slow, courteous ones he used in society. "I am only sorry, madame, that you were so easily deceived; I have been counting upon the pleasure of this dance with you all the evening, and now I find my right has been usurped, and you imposed upon."

"Too bad, really; but then you know all these little deceptions are quite usual at a masked ball," said Blanche lightly, and trying to hide her own vexation at the trick played upon them

both ; " but you must laugh at it as I do, monsieur ; and as you have lost this dance, you shall have as many others as you care to claim, to atone for it. Come, that is a fair promise, is it not ? "

" You are too kind, indeed, madame," he said, imitating her own evident desire to treat the whole affair as a joke. " But you must confess I have been somewhat hardly used in this matter. "

" You have indeed, and so have I, for until you spoke I had not the least suspicion that you were not my partner ; and you don't know, monsieur," she added, with one of her dazzling smiles, " what secrets I may have let out in consequence of that belief ; and then to find out I have been confiding in a stranger after all ! "

He smiled superciliously.

" I should have thought Madame de Verdreuil's own powers of discrimination were sufficiently keen for the mistake to have been discovered sooner," he said coldly ; for conceit was the Marquis d'Orvâl's strong, or rather weak point, and he could not afford to be magnanimous.

" The wisest and cleverest may be deceived sometimes," said Blanche. " Ah, this is my favourite waltz. Come, monsieur, forget your ill-humour, and let these magic strains efface all memory of it. "

There was no resisting this appeal, and D'Orvâl was too much a man of the world to let his vexation be apparent any longer ; besides, he thought it would soon be supper-time, and then he would have at least the satisfaction of knowing who this bold intruder (for so he termed him in his own mind) was. He therefore complied with Blanche de Verdreuil's invitation, and whirled her off into the circle of dancers.

It was the last waltz before supper. Vivienne St. Maurice was speedily besieged by requests to dance it, yet she seemed reluctant to give the right of prior claim to one more than another. As she stood combating the requests and entreaties urged so repeatedly on her, a tall figure bent over her hand, a low voice said, in quick decisive tones,

" Mademoiselle, I have the honour to remind you of your promise ; this is our last dance," and before Vivienne had recovered from her surprise, she found herself led once more into the dancing-salon by the unknown knight, Sir Lancelot.

She was too bewildered by his coolness and audacity to make any remonstrance ; nor could she be quite certain, at that moment, whether she had really promised him this waltz or not. It was only half over when he stopped and drew her away from the crowd into a recess.

" Mademoiselle St. Maurice," he said in a voice low, rich, and musical—a voice which Vivienne thought the most beautiful she

had ever heard,—“I must ask your forgiveness once more before I leave. Will you pardon my boldness, and believe that I had a motive for acting in this manner—mysterious as it may seem—a motive you could not blame if you knew it? One day I may be able to explain it to you, for we shall meet again, and that soon.”

“Are you a prophet or magician, that you can tell that?” said Vivienne, her face flushing before the glance of the dark, earnest eyes fixed so steadily on her. “Nothing is certain in this world, you know, and many things may happen to prevent my seeing you ever again. I may leave Paris. I may—”

“Nonsense!” he interrupted impatiently. “I tell you our meeting is as certain as that I now speak to you.”

“Without my knowing who you are?” said Vivienne, finishing his sentence for him. “You forget that, monsieur.”

“I don’t forget it,” he said earnestly. “You will know me again if you can remember my voice, which is the only thing I have not altered along with my disguise. And now, mademoiselle, my time is short, for I leave immediately; say what I wish to hear; say you pardon my deception.”

Vivienne smiled mischievously up at the masked face above her.

“Why should I say it?” she asked; “and besides, monsieur, you have no business to leave before supper. You are bound to satisfy our curiosity then as to who you are. It is not fair to mystify every one as you have done, and then leave us to puzzle over it, as we shall undoubtedly do.”

“Have I not told you, you shall know some day? yes, and that soon, if you care to know, mademoiselle.”

“Of course I care,” she said, the faint colour rising in her cheeks once more. “All women are curious, you know, monsieur, and I fear I share that particular weakness of my sex to the utmost extent possible—a humiliating confession, is it not?”

“Its truth makes it a noble one. Now the waltz is ending and I must go,” he said hurriedly. “Farewell, mademoiselle; since you will not say what I wish, I must go without it.”

“Farewell,” she said, still smiling; then taking a flower from her bouquet, she suddenly placed it in his hand. “If you know Italian,” she continued, blushing again as if at her own sudden impulse—“if you know my language, monsieur, you will know what *this means*.”

He took it eagerly, while a strange, swift light glowed in his dark, earnest eyes.

“I know,” he said in Italian, “and when you meet me again I will tell you, if you remember this night.”

Then he left her with no further word or look—left her standing there in her graceful beauty, her innocent youth, amidst the

glitter of warmth and light in the festive saloons that were now a blaze of colour, a whirl of moving figures.

Swiftly and surely he threaded his way through the numerous reception-rooms¹ and into the court without. Servants rushed eagerly to ask his bidding, and he answered them all impatiently, "His carriage was waiting—he needed no assistance."

Then springing into a close carriage which was standing at the entrance gates of the hotel, he gave an order in a low voice to the footman. Those loitering about could not catch the direction; curious eyes noted how plain was the carriage—how neither crest nor coronet adorned its panels, and how the footmen wore no livery. Everything was simple and unpretentious, and this was the first guest who left Blanche de Verdreuil's ball that night.

Through the lighted streets the carriage whirled swiftly along, and its occupant, leaning back, tore the mask from his face, and tossed it down on the seat beside him.

"What impulse prompted me," he said half aloud, with a fierce, wild impatience in his voice, that startled even himself. "Beautiful they said she was; ah! beautiful does not express one half of the witchery that lives in every smile and glance of that exquisite face! I have only seen it once, and yet for the first time in my life I wish I was once more young and pure as Albert is."

And Raoul de Verdreuil leant back in his carriage, and amidst the glare and tumult of the lighted streets he saw nothing, felt nothing, save one feeling alone—which had sprung to sudden life beneath the smiles of a girl's lips—the dreamy loveliness of a girl's dark eyes. Before his mind there swam a dim, confused memory of blinding colours and dazzling lights, the gleam of jewels and the flash of women's eyes beneath the masks that hid all other beauty.

But was it these which made his heart throb with swift, uneven beats, which blinded his eyes to all external objects in the world of gaiety and brilliance around?

Was it not rather a pure girl-face that stood out from among all others with its dreamy, lustrous eyes, gazing half-awed, half-dazzled at the wonders of a new life? Was it not rather a graceful white-robed figure, standing alone in its purity and simplicity among the surrounding radiance of colour? Was it not the smile of those child-like lips which had so suddenly lit up his heart to a new knowledge, and opened his eyes to a beauty he had passed all these years of his life, neither knowing nor caring to know?

Raoul de Verdreuil, for the first time in his life, was haunted by such doubts, and pursued by such memories as these.

CHAPTER VI.

A "CONTE DES FÉES."

"We sigh not, and the eye's not moistened;
 We laugh at times, we often smile.
 In not a look, in not a gesture,
 The secret comes to light the while."

Heine.

THROUGH the late night, and till the rising dawn was flushing the eastern sky, the ball went gaily on. Blanche de Verdreuil had declared it should be a success, and spared neither pains nor expense to make it so.

The supper-room was magnificent, hung with rose-coloured silk, and lighted with crystal chandeliers, flashing their brilliant light on a meal sumptuous and exquisite as the most fastidious taste could desire. Masks were removed, and faces fair and brilliant shone forth to dazzle and bewilder, without the envious disguise which had hitherto concealed them. And at the head of the table, with the light falling on the lustre of her hair, the diamonds in her bosom, the floating delicate-hued draperies of her dress, sat Blanche de Verdreuil.

A feverish gaiety gave brightness to her eyes, and flushed her cheeks with unwonted brilliance, till they glowed like the rose japonicas in her bouquet. Her laugh rang out clear and sweet as ever; her wit was no less keen and graceful as she parried the words of homage and flattery murmured in her ear; and yet Blanche de Verdreuil's heart was beating fast and fierce with keenest pain and deadly fear, and her eyes, as they swept the faces around her with constant uneasy restlessness, were bright with inward fever, not with pleasure or enjoyment.

"Every one is unmasked, yet I do not see our friend Lancelot the Second," said the Marquis d'Orvâl in a low voice, as he bent towards the countess.

"No; he is not here, I am afraid," she answered, while the bright colour wavered and paled in her face, as her glance wandered uneasily down the length of the crowded room.

"I suppose he was afraid to betray himself," said Léon d'Orvâl with a supercilious sneer. "Certainly he has played a very mean and unjustifiable part in the entertainment you have given us, madame, and it appears we are not even to have the satisfaction of his presence to answer for it."

"Let us dismiss the subject, pray," said Blanche; "I am weary of it, monsieur. Mystery is a thing I particularly dislike,

and as there seems no probability of our discovering this one, it is best to think no more about it."

Apparently Léon d'Orvâl thought so also, for he alluded to it no more, but turned his attention to Vivienne St. Maurice, who was seated beside him, and gave himself entirely up to the task of entertaining her.

He would not have felt flattered, however, had he known that his fair companion was inwardly contrasting his languid graces and affectations with the rich musical voice, the manly, earnest words she had so lately heard from the stranger knight—contrasting them, too, in a manner which placed the Marquis d'Orvâl at considerable disadvantage; and though she smiled and listened and answered, her ear was inattentive, her mind *distracted* and absent, and it was no small relief to her when the guests left the supper-table and returned to the ball-room again.

Vivienne would fain have remained by Blanche de Verdreuil's side, but such a thing was impossible; she was besieged every moment by new claimants for her hand; and as the night waned swiftly, the tide of gaiety flowed higher and yet more brilliantly along.

The ward of the countess was without dissent pronounced the most beautiful of all the lovely women in those crowded rooms; her *début* was a complete success; her words and smiles were courted as assiduously as the vainest could have desired; she stood on the first giddy eminence of power, and yet was scarcely conscious of it. The flattery, and homage, and adulation, poured out so freely and continuously, were lightly put aside with the graceful disbelief, the enchanting carelessness of a child. The proudest and the noblest who courted her attention could not flatter himself that he would even be remembered; and the serene unconsciousness of her manner was a thousandfold heightened by the beauty of that exquisite face, which smiled on all and changed for none.

Blanche de Verdreuil noted the triumph of her ward, and a sudden pang of jealousy swept through her heart. Was her beauty less—her charms no greater than those of the girl she had taken from poverty and obscurity, and raised to such a height as this? she questioned angrily. And yet it was as well that Vivienne should triumph—that the world should bow before her beauty and court her smiles—for was it not a sure method of furthering her own interests—of obtaining a footing, at once secure and lasting, in that world whose notice she courted and coveted as the one thing most desirable in life?

So she hid her jealousy and her fears, and the soft languid utterances of her lips from time to time confirmed and agreed

with the praises uttered of her ward's grace and loveliness. A few words here and there let fall just enough of Vivienne's history to satisfy curiosity and silence scandal; for the rest, the girl must manage her affairs herself, she thought, and it would be strange, indeed, if that exquisite witchery of face, voice, and manner could not subdue doubts, and achieve for Vivienne a woman's surest safeguard—marriage.

The ball went on till the faint grey dawn crept in through the curtained windows, and the pure breath of the morning air swept over the heavy perfumes of the heated rooms. Then gradually the hues and colours changed and faded; the low murmur of voices, the soft chimes of woman's laughter, died away; the salons and reception-rooms swiftly emptied themselves of the groups of maskers; and Vivienne St. Maurice, standing by Blanche de Verdreuil's side as the last guests departed, murmured half audibly to the beautiful triumphant woman smiling her last farewells, receiving her last compliments:—

"Ah, madame, what a pity it is all over! It was like a *conte des fées!*"

* * * * *

A short time later, and Blanche de Verdreuil sat in her luxurious dressing-room, with her rich *toilette de soir* exchanged for a robe of lace and muslin, and the shining masses of her hair no longer crowned with diamonds, but unbound and hanging in waves and ripples half-way to her feet. Very lovely she looked, leaning languidly back in the luxurious *fauteuil*—lovely still, though her face had lost its brilliance, her eyes their lustre, and the one was pale as if with weariness, the others shadowed by anxious thought.

She was thinking not of her ball in its gay and successful brilliance—not of the noble and courtly crowd who had honoured and graced it so willingly—not of the Marquis d'Orvâl's honeyed words and graceful flatteries, nor his promise to secure her admission into those rigid and exclusive circles she had long sighed to enter—no, not of any of these, but of that one strange guest who had sought her side—of his words, which, whether purposeless, or *meant* as a menace of danger, had stirred to life a cold, deadly fear within her heart—of a scene his story had recalled to her; and she shuddered as she bent over her fire now, and asked herself what his purpose could have been, and who *he* was, this mysterious stranger, whose words had curdled her blood with fear, and robbed her ball of all its promised triumph.

"Shall I ever be secure?" she thought with sudden, passionate fear as she tossed back the shining masses of her hair, and

gazed half-affrighted at her own image in the mirror beside her. "Will none be merciful enough to forget *that*? Is it to haunt me as a Nemesis all my days—to dog my steps, and rise before me, turn where I will, leaving me powerless to purchase my safety or hide my shame?"

"I thought beauty was invincible," she continued, after a pause, during which she had mercilessly scanned the reflection of her own face as the mirror gave it back—taking in the faultless features, the sunlit hair, the lustrous eyes, the arched, pouting lips, as though they were only means to an end—tools to be used unsparingly in some service she had set herself. "But I have learnt its weakness once already; it was valueless in *his* eyes—the only man from whom I have anything to fear. Will it be valueless soon in those of others? I fear it. Vivienne is a dangerous rival, and I fear will never prove a plastic or a willing tool. I must call my last resources into action, and yet treachery to *him* seems so base! I have not learnt to hate him yet, though I have tried so long; I have not learnt to forget the only weakness I was ever guilty of—my love. And until then—until then—oh, God, I cannot wrong him!"

In the solitude around, while yet the world was wrapped in slumber, and the waking beauty of the dawn had no eyes to see it save some chance wanderer without a home, or some grief-stricken watcher by a bed of pain, Blanche de Verdreuil stooped her proud head, and crouched before the brightness and warmth of the flickering flames like a guilty thing; covering her eyes as if to shut out from sight some of the misery and the shame she could not banish, that nothing could teach her to forget—nay, worse, that others would not forget for her.

She sat there, never moving or stirring, though the day was rapidly advancing; motionless, save for some shiver, as of fear or pain, that from time to time ran through her; feeling no sense of fatigue, no willingness to sleep, though the flush had long faded from her face and left it colourless as marble. Nor did she raise her head from its drooping posture till the noise and bustle in the streets without fell at last on her ear, and the golden shafts of sunlight pierced the draperies of falling silk that would fain have shut them out a little longer.

Then she started to her feet, and with steps slow and weary, as of one in pain, she sought her couch at last; and as she went a gleam of defiance flashed through the languor of her eyes—a smile, merciless and cruel, lingered on her lips, and she muttered in a voice wholly unlike her own sweet musical tones, "There is no choice now—it must be done—and *soon*!"

CHAPTER VII.

"FOR THY LOVE I NEVER PRAY'D."

"Ne'er to stir thy bosom thought I;
For thy love I never pray'd."—*Heine*.

It was the morning after the *bal masqué*, and Vivienne St. Maurice sat waiting for the countess in her pretty, daintily-furnished morning-room, where they usually breakfasted together.

The girl's eyes were bright, and a smile stole ever and anon to her lips as if her thoughts were all pleasant, her memories all unshadowed. Were they of the flattery and homage laid at her feet the previous night—of the triumph she had won—the conquests she had achieved?

"Are you tired of waiting?" said Blanche de Verdreuil's voice, startling her suddenly from her reverie.

"Oh no, madame!"—and Vivienne turned from the window and came forward to greet the countess—"I have only been down a few minutes myself."

"Your dissipation has certainly not affected your looks," said Blanche, looking with a faint shadow of envy at the bright, glowing face of the girl, and made painfully aware of her own pale cheeks and languid eyes by the contrast. "I wish I could say the same; I am very tired this morning."

She seated herself at the breakfast-table, and, as Vivienne took her place beside her, said carelessly,—

"And now tell me all about your conquests last night, *ma chère*. They seemed numerous enough, as far as I could judge."

Vivienne flushed scarlet.

"Do you call it *conquest* to be besieged by a crowd of flatterers who, I suppose, say the same unmeaning things to every one they meet?" she asked gravely.

"Now pray don't begin your old arguments about sincerity and truth, and all that nonsense," said Blanche impatiently. "I wish I could put some common sense into your head, Vivienne. All girls who are introduced into the world ought to have but one aim and object constantly before them—to make a brilliant marriage. A girl with a face like yours, and with the advantages of your present position, can command any match of the season, if she only plays her cards well and skilfully. After that is once achieved, your life will be one continued success; and I particularly wish you to bear this in mind, because a first season is everything, and you have already the ball at your feet.

Of course you know very well, Vivienne, that your present position is not in any way secure. You have no rank, no parentage, to give you any solid claim upon society; and the utmost tact will be needed to enable you to hold your own, even after the brilliant triumph of your first introduction. I think the Marquis d'Orvâl is really serious at last, his admiration is excessive; and if you take my advice you will not let him escape. He is the *parti* of the season at present. I can wish you no better or more enviable fate than to bring him to your feet; and without flattery, Vivienne, I must say I don't think that will be a very difficult matter for you to attempt."

The girl's face burned with hot blushes, as if some shame lay in this worldly counsel.

"The Marquis d'Orvâl is nothing to me," she said proudly, "nor would he be if he were ten times as rich and great as you say he is. Oh, madame! is it quite impossible for me to enjoy the world without a marriage of convenience being forced upon my notice?—without my looking upon every man who notices me as a speculation for my own views, an object for securing my own safety? Indeed, indeed, I would a thousand times rather die in poverty and obscurity than lead such a life as that."

"It is very likely you will die in poverty and obscurity if you continue with this romantic folly," said Blanche de Verdreuil angrily. "For goodness sake, Vivienne, remember what chances you are throwing away! What madness it is to suppose that, if your real history were known, you would ever be received by the society you can now reign over like a queen! Do you suppose that such things as wealth and rank and position drop from the clouds, that you can afford to make light of them when fate casts them at your feet, and you have merely to stoop and raise them at your pleasure? You make me positively angry with your romantic and childish ideas. What do you expect is to become of you in the end, if you make light of all these advantages now?"

Vivienne was silent, though the hot flush burned deeper and deeper on her cheek, and her soft eyes looked indignant; but she knew what it was to argue with the countess on these matters: such conversations had been of frequent occurrence between them since her arrival in Paris, and the worldly wisdom of Blanche de Verdreuil usually silenced her arguments with sophistry too skilful for her to combat, though it left her unshaken in her own mind as to her views.

"I have spoken to you often before," continued Blanche; "but I feel it incumbent upon me now to urge more strongly than ever the positive necessity of your making a wealthy and creditable marriage. It is the one reason for my introducing you to the

world as I have done. I promised your gran'mère, as you call her, that I would befriend you as long as it was in my power ; and I can serve you in no better way than by impressing upon you the absolute necessity of securing some surer footing in society than I can give you. You are no child now, Vivienne ; you must surely see what lies before a portionless, nameless girl whose whole history is shrouded in mystery, and whose life has been dependent on the charity of others. The years are few that a woman reigns, even with such beauty as you possess, and the highest wisdom you can practise is to seize the golden opportunity now lying at your very hand, and give the world no further excuse for cavilling or wondering at your success. A woman, once married, has safety, security, freedom. Until then she is but the bond-slave of circumstances, she has no certain foothold in the society she rules ; and that you have not, Vivienne, as you well know."

The girl's beautiful face had grown very pale at these words ; her breath came and went as if her heart were stirred by some deep emotion. As Blanche ceased speaking, she glanced proudly and fearlessly up and said,—

"Madame, what promises you made to my old friend you know best yourself. Only, if I had thought that my dependent position would have been so constantly brought before me, I should have found courage to disobey even her last wishes, and never humiliated myself by living in a false position so long. A girl who is friendless and nameless, as you say I am, has little claim upon the world ; and had you told me your real motive for introducing me to its notice in the manner you have done, I would never have consented to leave Renonçeux. There are some—many, perhaps—who would think my position an enviable one ; to me it is only a bitter humiliation. But say what you will, madame, I shall never add to it the crowning degradation of a marriage such as you describe. I would rather work—beg—starve—than take from a man's love, or a man's belief in me, the advantages of a selfish security. At least my pride will not suffer me to stoop so low as that, now that your words have shown me what shame and reproach can lie in that word 'marriage.'"

The Countess de Verdreuil bit her lip with vexation. Did not these words bare the secret of her own married life to her now ? did they not show the real degradation in which she had steeped that life while cloaking its past sins and shame and follies with the mantle of an honourable name, with the trust and belief of a man's great love which asked for no recompense, sought no reward save her own heart ?

"If these are your views," she said coldly, "I see very little

use in your coming to Paris at all. However, I shall hope that another month of this life will open your eyes to its advantages, and that, instead of reproaching me for my well-meant efforts on your behalf, you will come to see that my views are the wisest and the safest."

"I did not mean to seem ungrateful for all your kindness and interest, madame," said Vivienne humbly. "I only meant to say that I cannot bring myself to look upon marriage as a cloak of convenience. Whoever marries me will know my history as far as I know it myself. That there is no shame in it I am perfectly sure, and perhaps the mystery surrounding it may one day be cleared up, and then all the world may know who I am. I have no wish to sail under false colours even now; and if you think, madame, that the fact of your mentioning my history will in any way interfere with the reception I may meet with among your friends and acquaintances, I would rather a thousand times that you did so and left me to retirement and obscurity than force me into a position to which I have no right, and whose tenure will ever be insecure so long as it depends on falsehood and deception."

"You may be thankful I am not so foolish as yourself," said Blanche, rising from her seat, as if to put an end to the conversation. "You little know what danger and what misery the world holds for women whose beauty has neither rank nor position to uphold it. Life is pleasant enough to those who have skill to make it serve them, not bend and serve *it*. Now I must leave you to your own reflections. My husband wishes me to drive with him this morning, and I have promised to do so. *Au revoir, ma chère*, and try to believe the best philosophy in the world is that which teaches a woman her own value—and how to preserve it."

She left the room as she spoke, and Vivienne was alone once more. She rose to her feet with flashing eyes and burning cheeks.

"Surely she has no soul, no heart, no conscience to speak thus!" cried the girl, with a swift, passionate scorn lighting her face. "Oh, why have I bound myself to obey her? For three years more this bondage lies upon me; for three years more her roof must shelter me. A promise to the dying is sacred, they say; how sacred I only know *now*, when to break the chains of Blanche de Verdreuil's caprices I would give all I possess, and yet I dare not do it."

She went to the window and stood gazing down into the busy street below, while the azure warmth of the morning sky stretched calmly and cloudlessly above its bustle and confusion, a silent rebuke in its serene quietude to the endless turmoil with which men vex the world and themselves.

The great city was all astir with the new cares of a new day. The pulse of life throbbed fast and fierce within its breast, under the glorious light of the springtide and the blue arch of the cloudless sky, under the fetters of tyranny as under the banners of freedom.

The fair girl-face looked down on the stream of traffic, the luxuries of wealth, the countless contrasts between each grade of life, each rank and class, which only a great city can show. On the steps of a church crouched a wretched outcast, humbly asking alms from the beautiful aristocrat whose trailing robes swept negligently by as she entered for the early Mass; at the street corner a flower-girl, with a dark Italian face and lustrous eyes, moved hastily aside to escape the curling lash of a coachman in gorgeous livery as he drove a magnificent carriage past her, while the dust from its wheels almost blinded her as she gazed enviously at its occupant—a laughing, painted woman, who might have been a beggar like herself, had she not learnt the wisdom of the world in time—that wisdom which makes vice a better paymaster than virtue.

Vivienne turned away, sighing half pitifully for the misery of the one, for the shame of the other.

"How much there is in the world for us to do!" she said sadly; "and yet, while wealth and poverty pass each other every hour of the day, while the terrible contrast between them is so glaringly apparent, there seems no sense of responsibility, no thought of injustice in the minds of the rich and the great; no fear of the evils they encourage, the wrongs they foster and increase."

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An hour later a visitor called at the hotel of the Count de Verdreuil, and inquired for him.

"Monsieur le Comte was not at home," he was informed; "he was driving with madame."

"I will wait, then," was the answer. "Don't hesitate about admitting me," he continued, smiling at the man's puzzled face. "I am his son; if you were not a stranger here you would have known that without my telling you."

The man bowed humbly.

"Pardon, monsieur! I have not the honour to know monsieur, being a stranger, but, if he will please to wait, there is little doubt but that Monsieur le Comte will be back within an hour. Meantime Mademoiselle St. Maurice is in the morning-room; shall I have the pleasure of announcing monsieur's arrival to her?"

"No, don't trouble yourself," said Raoul de Verdreuil care-

lessly, "I will find my way without your assistance. Meantime let my father know of my being here as soon as he arrives."

Without further parley he went up the broad staircase, and turned in the direction of the room where he had been informed Vivienne was. Even had he not known which it was, he would soon have discovered it, for he heard the sound of a voice singing, and, softly turning the handle of the door, so as to enter noiselessly and unperceived, he found himself in the presence of Vivienne St. Maurice.

Her back was turned to the door, and she herself was seated before the grand piano, too engrossed in her occupation to hear Raoul's noiseless entrance. He stood quite silent, listening to the rich, passionate voice thrilling out in the stillness with a power and pathos he had never heard in any other.

Music had always a power over him, and music such as this was so exquisite that it gave the girl before him a divinity, an intoxication, an ideality, quite apart from the feelings he had formed of any living woman yet. He saw her with the flood of the rich sunlight falling through the hangings of amber silk, and lighting the lustre of her hair—that beautiful bronze-hued hair, so lovely and so matchless in colour. He saw her in the radiance of the noonday glory as it fell on the white folds of her dress, on the exquisite lines of the girlish figure, and all the force and fervour of his memory of the past night swept back like a flood over his heart, and made him for once breathless, speechless, bewildered in the presence of a woman.

Her song ceased, and as she rose from the instrument she for the first time became aware of his presence. A look of haughty surprise flashed in her eyes—those dark, lovely southern eyes, which mirrored every thought and feeling of her nature. Her glance swept over him with a surprised and amazed interrogation that recalled him to himself.

"Pardon me," he said, as he bowed low before her, "I fear you consider me an intruder. I must introduce myself, therefore, as Raoul de Verdreuil; you, mademoiselle, are doubtless Mademoiselle St. Maurice. I have heard too much of you to fail to recognise you immediately."

Over the girl's exquisite face came a flush of wonderful softness and surprise.

"Are *you* Raoul de Verdreuil?" she said impulsively; "Albert's friend, of whom I have heard him speak a thousand times? Ah, welcome, monsieur! how little I thought of ever meeting you again in Paris! We imagined you were still abroad."

"I returned very suddenly," he said, taking the hand she so frankly outstretched in greeting. "I went first to Renonçeux

but learnt from Albert you were all in Paris, so I came here again, mademoiselle."

"You have been to Renonçeux lately?" she said eagerly. "Ah, then you can tell me all the news of the château. How is Albert, Monsieur de Verdreuil? Is he not tired of his lonely life? Why could you not persuade him to come to Paris with you?"

"He likes his solitary life too well, I fear," said Raoul, inwardly conscious of a strange pang at this vivid interest and concern in the young artist's welfare, yet vexed at the disloyalty he could not account for. "I tried to persuade him to come, mademoiselle, but in vain. He sent you many messages, and bade me tell you how much he misses your presence at Renonçeux, but still I could not tempt him from his solitude."

While he spoke, Vivienne's eyes rested searchingly on him. What was it so familiar to her about this stranger she wondered? Not the face. *That* she knew she had not seen, save in the picture gallery at Renonçeux. Was it the voice that stirred some recent memory in her heart, that perplexed and puzzled her every time its rich, musical accents fell on her ear? Yet where could she have heard it before? Suddenly a thought flashed upon her; the hot colour flushed in her cheeks, and her eyes rested on Raoul with a light, half mischievous, half doubting, and wholly bewitching, with its mixture of childish gaiety and womanly dignity.

"Have you been in Paris long?" she asked. "Were you not here before to-day, monsieur?"

"Of course," he said, with a grave smile, as if he knew what had prompted the question. "Many times before to-day, Mademoiselle St. Maurice."

"No, but I mean were you not here *last night*?" she continued impulsively. "I am sure of it—certain of it; but still one may be mistaken, you know."

He laughed.

"What makes you think I was here last night, mademoiselle?" he questioned carelessly.

"Because at the ball there was some one whose name we could not discover; who—oh, monsieur! I am sure I am right when I say that you played that trick upon us. You impersonated Lancelot du Lac—though how you could have copied the Marquis d'Orval so exactly, I cannot imagine!"

He smiled gravely at her impulsive questioning.

"I did not think a woman's wit was so quick," he said. "How do you associate me with this mysterious individual, mademoiselle? Are you quite certain you are not mistaken?"

"Quite certain," she said, laughing gleefully; "you cannot

deceive me, monsieur; I remember your voice perfectly well.”

“Do you?” he said—a bright gleam of pleasure flashing from his dark eyes at her innocent words. “And do you remember *la loi*?”

From the pocket of his coat he drew a flower—the flower Vivienne had given to the mysterious knight the previous evening. A bright wave of colour flushed the girl’s fair face as she saw it again, and she glanced shyly and nervously at Raoul.

“I see you do,” he said quietly. “And now to explain the mystery of my appearance. I owe my costume to your description of what the Marquis d’Orvâl was to wear, in your letter to Albert.”

“But why did you make such a mystery of the matter?” inquired Vivienne timidly. “Why not have appeared in your own character, Monsieur de Verdreuil?”

“I had reasons of my own for not wishing to be recognised,” he answered gravely. “Strange and unaccountable as my conduct may seem, I must ask you to dispense with all explanations of it at present; and now let us dismiss the subject while I give you all the news of Renonçeux.”

But Vivienne seemed shy and embarrassed in his presence now, and the frank cordiality of her manner had disappeared. They could not meet as strangers—these two, who had heard so much of each other—and the memory of the previous night was still fresh in the minds of both. Whenever Vivienne thought of that, the same restraint crept over her, and replaced the former ease and childlike frankness of her looks and words.

Of Raoul de Verdreuil she had heard a thousand times—of his courage, his fearless nobility, his stainless honour, his intense pride, and his chivalrous friendship; and in her own innocent dreams he had figured often as a hero—a man apart from all other men. And now she met him—had met him in ignorance of his very identity with her ideal of manly perfection, and she grew frightened, and bewildered, and ill at ease as she thought of this and wondered how she should entertain this *preux chevalier* of her fancy; ignorant all the time that his eyes were feasting on the varying expressions of her face, and that in his heart he no longer wondered at Albert Hoffman’s rapt enthusiasm and inalienable devotion to this girl.

He noted her embarrassment at length, and with the utmost tact and delicacy sought to relieve it; drawing her on to forget the fact of their strange acquaintance, and tell him of her life at Renonçeux, her passion for music, her thoughts and fancies, whose very purity and simplicity made them seem precious and

inestimable in the eyes of this man of the world, who had seen so much of the evil, the vanity, and the folly of life.

In all his experience he had never met any one like her, and a new and strange reverence crept into his heart, and softened his own eyes, as ever and anon they sought the lovely childlike face before him.

He read like an open book the frank, sweet nature of this girl, whose every glance, whose every word, haunted and perplexed him as the fairest beauty, the most brilliant graces of other women, had never done.

He did not pause to analyze what he felt, to question the subtle meaning of this new power. He never feared that his strength, which had hitherto been great enough to defy all fascinations of women, might bend and yield before the smile of this one girl. He never dreamt that this graceful, beautiful child, who stood on the very threshold of a life which to him had long seemed vanity and weariness, held in her hands a spell against which his cynical coldness would be powerless to rebel--that, living in her idealistic sphere of fair faiths and golden fancies, she could allure him to the same belief, and charm him to the same tenderness, that reigned in her own heart.

He had been careless, contemptuous, indifferent all his life with women. Now, for the first time, he saw the sweetness and freshness of a nature unsullied by the world's breath, by the world's teaching; and, seeing it, he longed with a strange, irresistible longing to keep its innocence unharmed, its purity untouched; for though he had held women lightly, and revered them as little as men of the world do reverence them, when judging their real worth, by the little esteem they set upon themselves, yet at this moment those pure eyes looked down all base, unholy thoughts within his breast, and brought to his heart a revelation unguessed, unknown, through all these years he had lived.

Some far-off memories of his boyhood rose to life, when high and lofty ambitions had filled his dreams of the future, when an ideal love had swept into the chambers of his heart and nestled there, looking down at him with eyes as pure and shadowless as those on which he gazed. The dreams and the faith he had never realized, and almost forgotten, came back to him now with sorcery far sweeter, with power far greater, than he had known then.

Was it too late?

CHAPTER VIII.

HOW LIGHT A CAUSE!

"Alas! how light a cause may move
Dissension between hearts that love!"

Moore.

For more than an hour Vivienne and Raoul were together, with no interruption; and in that hour they made rapid strides towards that friendship and intimacy which was destined to affect their after-lives so materially.

Never had Raoul exerted himself to please any one as he did to interest and amuse this girl; never had he so freely displayed the stores of his mind, the force of his intellect, the bold poetic imagery, which long travel and acquaintance with the world had fostered and created within him; and Vivienne listened to him entranced by the wonders he unfolded, the scenes he painted, the countries he described. That hour passed all too swiftly for them both, and, much as Raoul had longed to greet his father, the entrance of the count and his wife was not so welcome as it ought to have been to him.

Blanche entered, radiant, lovely as a vision in her shimmering robes, her dainty Parisian bonnet, her whole faultless toilette; but as Raoul's eyes fell on his father he could hardly repress an exclamation of horror, so marked was the change in the old man he had left so hale and hearty only two years before. The erect form was bent and bowed, as if the weight of age had suddenly made itself felt; the noble, haughty face was lined and shrunk, as if with care and suffering; the eyes had lost their fire, and were dull and lustreless now; and Raoul, as he took the frail, trembling hands in his own, could not repress some expression of the grief and the shock which his father's appearance gave him.

"Have you been ill since I left?" he questioned anxiously. "I am grieved indeed to see you so changed."

"Changed—nonsense!" said the old man impatiently; "I am very well; perfectly well, Raoul. More years left in me than you imagine, perhaps. Come, come; don't stand looking at me with that woe-begone face; tell me all about yourself—where you have been—when you arrived. Have you just come to Paris?"

"Yes," said Raoul absently, too shocked and bewildered to collect his thoughts yet. "I went to Renonçeux, thinking I should find you there; but as Albert told me you had come to Paris, I followed you."

"Ah, that was right, that was right," said the old man. "Yes, I have come up for the season. Blanche must not lose it, you know, and Renonçeux is but dull for her when all the rest of the world are enjoying themselves in Paris."

"But you know you like to come too," said the countess, "and the doctors all recommended it for you, and I am sure you look a great deal better than you did at Renonçeux."

"Yes, yes ; I am much better," he said hurriedly, while his eyes rested on his wife's fair face with the same rapt devotion as of yore. "And now, Raoul, let me look at you in your turn. Two years have changed you ; yes, certainly they have changed you : have they not, Blanche ? He looks so bronzed, and so much older too. Why, Raoul, the old man bears his years best after all !"

His son looked fondly down at the worn, aged face, and a great, intense pity gathered in his eyes.

"I am glad it is so," he said ; "I wish you may keep your health and strength for many years to come, father. But really I shall begin to think I am quite an 'ancient mariner' in appearance soon, every one seems so determined to impress upon me the fact of my looking so much older since I left France two years ago."

Blanche looked quickly at him as he spoke.

"Have you come to stay in Paris," she asked ; "or is this one of your flying visits again ?"

Half unconsciously his eyes strayed to Vivienne, where she stood by the window, her head turned away from the group in the centre of the room, that she might not seem to watch them.

"I have nothing to call me away for the next month," he said, answering her slowly at last, "and I may as well stop in Paris as anywhere else."

"Of course, of course," said his father hastily, "and you must take up your abode here as usual. There is room enough and to spare, and Blanche will be pleased to have you with us, I am sure."

He glanced at his wife as if expecting her to second his invitation, and she said haughtily, "Your son knows only too well that his home is open to him at any time. I should be sorry if he thought any invitation necessary before making use of it as he used to do."

Raoul's eyes rested on her with a curious, grave questioning, as if he sought some meaning beyond that of the words ; and Blanche, in spite of her efforts at self-command, felt the warm blood glow in her face as those sombre eyes rested so searchingly on her.

"I will avail myself of your invitation, then," he said at length, "and take up my abode with you while I stay in Paris."

"Very well ; then that is settled," said the old count ; "and now I will leave you to the ladies for a little while, Raoul. I shall see you again in an hour or two. I—I have some business to attend to."

"Can I be of any assistance to you?" said Raoul eagerly.

"No, no!" he answered quickly, almost impatiently. "If I want you at any time, Raoul, you may be certain I shall not wait long before asking for your help. Meanwhile I will order one of the servants to fetch your things from your hotel, as you mean to stay here ;" and he left the room hurriedly, as if he feared his son might again offer to accompany him.

"You find your father very much changed, do you not?" said Blanche, turning to Raoul as the old man left them.

"I do indeed," he answered gravely and sadly ; "more than I expected—more than his years demand. I am grieved to see it."

"The count is never well in Paris," said Vivienne, speaking for the first time since the others had entered. "I think he looks much worse since we came here."

"What nonsense, Vivienne!" cried Blanche sharply. "Did not his physicians say that the air of Paris was far more suitable than any other? and you know that since we have been here he goes out a great deal more, and exerts himself a great deal more, than when he is moped in the château."

"He does not look fit for much exertion, in my opinion," said Raoul with cold displeasure ; for the heartlessness and selfishness of this woman grated upon him more keenly than ever. "At his years, life should be calm and tranquil and undisturbed."

"December should not wed with May, then," said Blanche arrogantly. "You forget, monsieur, that your father will not permit me to enjoy myself as I wish in society ; he thinks it incumbent upon him to attend me everywhere, ridiculous as it seems, and all my persuasions and entreaties are of no avail to prevent him doing so. But let us change the subject. Now you are here, you may perhaps be better able to make him more careful about himself. I confess I am not able to do so. And now let me ask if my ward has looked after your comfort during my absence? Have you had any refreshment? I suppose you made friends with each other without the ceremony of introduction?"

"Oh, yes!" said Raoul ; "I took the liberty of coming in here, attracted by a voice singing, and I found the owner of the voice was Mademoiselle St. Maurice. Of course I have heard

all about her from Albert, and so we needed little introduction."

"But I am sorry to say I forgot to ask you if you would not have any refreshment, as Madame la Comtesse suggests," said Vivienne, colouring. "We had not long finished breakfast when you came in; we were very late this morning, owing to the ball."

"Oh, yes! my *bal masqué*; it was such a success!" said Blanche eagerly. "Every one I have met to-day has been complimenting me about it. What a pity you were not here a day sooner, monsieur; you could have been present at it."

"A great pity certainly!" said Raoul, with a glance of amusement at Vivienne, who looked slightly confused at this remark. "I have no doubt, madame, my presence would have added to its success considerably."

"Vivienne!" said the countess suddenly, "I forgot to tell you that Madame François has come about your dress. You will find her in my boudoir."

The girl accepted the signal of dismissal without any observation, and left the room immediately. Blanche turned eagerly to Raoul as the door closed.

"What do you think of my ward?" she said hurriedly and somewhat anxiously. "You have heard her history I suppose?"

"Oh, yes! Albert told me long ago. I was surprised to hear of your turning philanthropist, madame."

"I hardly expected you would give me credit for disinterested motives in any action," said the Countess de Verdreuil haughtily; "but, ill as you think of me, monsieur, I yet had not the heart to let a friendless, beautiful girl like Vivienne St. Maurice be thrown on the scant charity of the world while I had it in my power to prevent it."

"Your words do you infinite credit," said Raoul, looking searchingly at the beautiful face before him. "So does your action; but as for your motives, madame, perhaps they lie somewhat deeper than I or the world can fathom."

Blanche de Verdreuil's face flushed with angry pride at his words.

"Whatever my motives may seem to you, I know them to be sincere," she answered coldly. "I pitied the girl and the position she was placed in—a position for which I could not but see she was in every way unfitted. It was Albert Hoffmann, however, who first told me her history; and when I saw her and heard her voice I thought it would only be a charity to let her see the world. Her future must be guided by the use she makes of her opportunities. Her great wish has been to go on the stage."

"The stage ! you surely will not allow that ?" cried Raoul impetuously. "Her purity, her innocence, to be contaminated by such a life ! To show herself for gold to the gazing crowd whose very admiration is shame ! To be applauded and admired according to the caprice of the moment, the reality of the passions she stimulates ! The bare idea is desecration to a nature like hers !"

"How interested you seem in my ward !" said Blanche, with a cold smile. "Your penetration does you infinite credit, monsieur, if in an hour you can read all characters as exactly as you seem to have done hers."

"Her face speaks it more plainly than any words," said Raoul quietly, not caring to bare his real interest to the scorn and satire of his enemy ; "and I know too well that such a nature as hers is most unfitted for the life of an actress. Her beauty is too rare for her to escape all the notoriety and persecution of the worldly and profligate. She cannot be happy, because, when once she learns the reality of the life which looks so bright and enchanting on the surface, her whole nature will recoil from it. Gold can never make the world a paradise for her as it is for so many of her sex. The falsehood and the vileness she will encounter will first shock and then disgust her. I know that already."

Blanche de Verdreuil looked scrutinizingly at him. Long as she had known Raoul, she had never seen him so stirred and moved by anything as her mention of Vivienne's wishes, and the vehement bitterness with which he spoke angered her excessively. Who was this girl—this beggared outcast she had befriended—that she should rouse in the cold, proud man she had loved so vainly an interest so profound, a sympathy so sudden ?

"Your judgment is flattering," she said ; "nevertheless, monsieur, Vivienne St. Maurice is, after all, no better than the rest of her sex. She pines for this life you deride, as though it were paradise ! In fact, were it not that she is bound to abide by my wishes and remain under my guardianship, by her promise to the old dead woman who was her only friend, I should not be able to restrain her inclinations. She would be on the stage even now. However, she is bound to remain with me until she is twenty-one, and if by that time she has not married, I make no doubt her first act on attaining her liberty will be to embrace the very profession of which you, monsieur, have such a righteous horror."

Raoul was silent ; he saw in that moment that Blanche de Verdreuil's motives for adopting Vivienne were not pure or disinterested—that the leaven of jealousy was already at work in her heart ; and a great fear rose within his own for the beautiful,

friendless girl whose only protection now was her own simple truth and integrity. He did not believe what Blanche had said ; he did not fear that Vivienne was really so enamoured of the false glitter of stage-life as to long for it with such excessive love and such complete belief as the countess had avowed, or that she was even now looking at those golden gates closed upon her own longings, with all the desire and belief that Blanche de Verdreuil ascribed to her. But he felt a strange interest and a vague fear respecting the future of this girl—feelings both strange and unwonted for him to experience, when he had so long scoffed and made light of the name and the power of women.

"I can scarcely believe you, madame," he said, after a brief hesitation, "and I must confess that I am puzzled to account for your motives in befriending this girl. However, since she is living under your roof, and introduced to the world under your guardianship, I can only hope that your own experience will at least make you pitiful to one so friendless and so gifted as she seems."

Blanche turned very pale at his words, and her eyes gleamed dangerously beneath their drooping lids.

"I wish your memory were not so faithful," she said haughtily. "Can you never recollect that my past is over and done with—buried fathoms deep with that old life whose very name I abhor, since circumstances have fashioned my fate so differently to what I anticipated *then*?"

"Did you bury conscience, honour, heart with it?" he asked ; "if so, I cannot wonder that your life gives you now all you need, and that remorse and pity have never disturbed its enjoyment."

"Have they not?" she cried, with a sudden, passionate grief that thrilled out in momentary forgetfulness of her efforts to appear hardened before this man. "O God ! how little you know—how little you dream of what my life is to me—of what my heart holds even *yet*!"

"Then let that remorse make you tender of the young life in your guardianship," he said gravely and gently—more gently than this woman had ever heard him speak since she became his father's wife. "Let the remembrance of *your* past make you gentle and pitiful of her future ! As you fulfil the trust of a dying woman—and reward the faith of a friendless girl—so will that God whose name you have just uttered spare and pardon you !"

The solemn, earnest words swept over her heart with a soothing peace long a stranger to it.

Involuntarily she turned to Raoul de Verdreuil, and her eyes for once spoke truth as they met his own—

“ If you had said so long ago—if you had been as gentle then as you are at this moment—I might have been a better woman, I might have saved myself from many a sin ; but now—I cannot believe that what man’s love denied and scorned, God’s love can pity and redeem ! ”

And with those reckless words she turned swiftly away and left him.

B. O O K I I I.

CHAPTER I.

THE FIRST SEEDS.

“ A cruel punishment for one most cruel,
 If such can love, to make that love the fuel
 Of the mind's hell.”—*Shelley*.

THE spring had deepened into summer.

The whirl of gaiety and pleasure was at its height in Paris. The city laughed and danced and glittered with its customary vivacious enthusiasm, its gay, inconstant thoughtlessness, like the thoughtlessness of a child in its summer-day idleness, its forgetfulness of care, its indifference to sorrow in years to come.

The days were all bright with the glow and warmth and colour of the skies of France. The nights were riotous with mirth and revelry and sin, while the streets were like streams of fire, and the avenues glittered with a million lights, and the leaves shook with the laughter and the music and the songs—the restless, ceaseless pleasure of life and motion which the populace loved.

And the great world ruled with its luxury, its frivolity, its endless pleasures crowded into every hour ; its endless heart-aches stifled under every folly ; the great world of fashion and of wealth, of vanity and greed ; and the season was as brilliant in its last days as in its first ; one moving, changing picture of charm and colour and show, whose surface gaiety seemed as full of delight as the bright city itself

To Vivienne St. Maurice that season in Paris had brought the full and perfect triumph of a woman's beauty.

Go where she would, a crowd of flatterers besieged her, admiration and love were showered upon her ; the world was at her feet from the moment the Marquis d'Orvâl had given the password for her admission by pronouncing her the most beautiful *débutante* Paris had ever seen.. Blanche de Verdreuil herself almost forgot to be jealous of her ward's beauty in the *prestige* it gave to her ownself. She had gained admission to many an exclusive and jealously-guarded circle only by a word from the Marquis d'Orvâl, whose infatuation respecting Vivienne was now a secret no longer, and who chose to have his idol

fêted and worshipped to the utmost by the world of fashion and the leaders of *ton*.

The marvel was that this life had not changed the girl—that every instinct of her nature adapted itself to it as easily as though from her cradle it had been her lot. The grave, sweet dignity, half childlike, half womanly, was still her greatest charm; the purity and singleness of her nature were all unharmed; the serene grace of word and manner remained unaltered and untouched by the homage and adulation poured out to her so continuously; and many a cold and worldly heart felt its charm, and bent to its influence with a reverence and belief in woman's purity long strange and unfelt.

The belle of the season, the queen of society, the victory-crowned beauty of Paris was in many respects the same pure, dreaming child who had lingered in the woods of Renonçeux and weaved her own strange, impossible fancies of life, and all belonging to it, under the shade of the leafy boughs, beneath the warmth of the slanting sun-rays.

The radiant eyes, gazing now on the world she could rule by a smile, a word, a glance, never marred their triumph by coquetry, never spoke a feeling false or trivial. The laughter on the happy, parted lips was still the mirth of a child's innocent enjoyment, was no fictitious semblance of joy or delight. Whether heiress or peasant, Vivienne St. Maurice would still be as alluring, as gracious, as pure as if the sins and the shame of the world could neither stain nor contaminate her innate and soul-felt purity.

That she had many enemies, many detractors, was of course to be expected. A triumph so sudden and so complete as hers must ever be the mark for censure, for envy and for malice. But she heard nothing that could pain or wound her—nothing that could distress her innocent enjoyment of life and all it brought her now. Even Blanche de Verdreuil had come to the conclusion that she could not afford to risk offending Vivienne now that she was a power in society, that Moloch to which she would have sacrificed all and everything she possessed.

But Blanche hated her all the same for her easy triumph, hated her for her beauty, hated her for her pure unsullied truth, hated her perhaps most of all because she saw that Raoul de Verdreuil gave to this girl such homage and such reverence as never in all his life he had bestowed on any woman before.

To her no light or frivolous word ever passed his lips. He treated her with such gentleness, such courtesy, such respect as made her whole heart turn and trust him, as filled her with wonder and delight that one she deemed so lofty and so great could thus stoop to feel even interest for one like her.

He had never used the language of lovers, therefore she gradually became accustomed to that grave, tender, familiar intercourse which invited her confidence and deepened her trust, till she came to consider Raoul as some one quite apart from the rest of the world—some one to whom she could turn in every trouble or perplexity, on whose strong, steadfast nature she could lean with perfect confidence and security.

And Raoul?

For the first time in his calm, self-controlled life, Raoul was recklessly, blindly deceiving himself. He believed he felt for this girl only the purest and most faithful friendship, born of her strange position—her unprotected life, her singular and enforced dependence on the woman who ruled in his own home. Long restraint had given him the iron force of self-control. Whatever softer thoughts, whatever whispered passions stirred his heart in her presence, he curbed and silenced with a stern resolution, unlike any he had previously exercised. He had so long scoffed at love, that he could not even suffer himself to dwell upon it as possible, especially now when love would be disloyalty to his only and earliest friend.

So while the constant intercourse and association of their lives threw them daily, almost hourly, together, the one never dreamt that her pure reverence and simple faith were becoming the very religion of a deathless love, and the other called his sympathy and interest and subjugated passion, that mockery which binds men and women in a tie so frail—a word, a look can break it—Friendship!

But one saw the danger to which they were drifting—one whose eyes were rendered doubly sharp by jealousy, by hatred, by disappointed passion—and in her heart there grew a dark and poisonous instinct, a cruel and remorseless plan, and she smiled at the blindness of both which left at her mercy the defenceless life and simple trust of the girl she had promised to befriend.

* * * *

Since Raoul de Verdreuil had remained in Paris, his father had delegated to him the task of accompanying and chaperoning his young wife and her beautiful ward to the endless festivities and amusements which made so constant a demand on their time.

His failing health and rapidly decreasing strength made him quite unfit for such an exertion himself, and he was glad to make it over to his son and remain in quiet and seclusion. Yet he was angry and jealously fearful of any remarks as to his own inability to undertake such duties, putting it all on the score of

disinclination or want of leisure, or any reason rather than the right one

Thus it happened that Raoul was more frequently in the society of the countess than either he cared or sought to be ; and thus it happened, too, that the very tools she wished for were placed in the hands of Blanche de Verdreuil for shaping and carving out a scheme base and sinful as her own nature—a scheme which was to bring ruin and degradation upon the home and name with which Raoul's fondest and dearest memories were associated.

Very skilfully she set to work ; very slowly and cautiously did poisoned whispers and distorted truths reach her husband's ear—rumours which pointed out some special attraction as the real cause of his son's long stay in Paris, his sudden fondness for gaiety, his gradual neglect of official and political demands, his new absorbing interest in his home life. Very cautiously these whispers spread and unfolded themselves like dark and evil dreams that cannot be shaken off, even while the dreamer laughs and mocks at them ; and while Raoul was all unconscious of the fierce jealousy his own actions were awaking in the old man's heart, a subtle hand was at work, a siren's voice, false and treacherous and alluring, breathed out falsehoods that wore the garb of truth, fictions that bore the semblance of reality.

Slowly and surely the coldness and restraint between father and son widened and deepened ; slowly and painfully Raoul's proud heart read the distrust he could neither account for nor disarm ; and while the breach in his home circle widened, he turned to the pure face and sweet, ready sympathy of Vivienne for consolation, and, finding it only too readily, thereby fanned the flame to fiercer burning in the jealous, vindictive nature of his enemy.

All unknowing what he did, all unconscious and unsuspecting of harm, Raoul de Verdreuil was sowing by his own heedlessness the first seeds of a harvest of revenge and shame and misery, which other hands would reap, as well as his own, in years to come !

CHAPTER II.

AN "AFFAIRE DU CŒUR."

"Difficulties spur us when they do not check us."—*Readé.*

"ONLY one week more and then we shall be back at Renonçeux !"

The speaker was Vivienne St. Maurice, and the words were addressed to the Marquis d'Orvâl, as they stood side by side, one sweet moonlit night, on a balcony overlooking the beautiful illuminated gardens of the Hôtel d'Alençon. She had been dancing with the marquis, and, complaining of the heat of the rooms, he had led her forth into the cool scented summer air, and now stood silently watching her as the moonlight fell on her beautiful face and lit up the depths of her lustrous, starry eyes.

"You speak as if you were glad to leave Paris," he said, in answer to her remark. "Do you never think of the pain and the regret your absence will occasion ?"

She laughed—the low laughter of a happy child.

"I am not vain enough to suppose such a thing for a single moment," she answered. "I know the world will not feel the absence of a unit like myself : even if it should, there is plenty of consolation to be obtained, and I shall soon be forgotten."

"By *some*, perhaps ; by many not soon, or easily, or ever. You do yourself wrong to suppose so."

She looked away from him down into the beautiful gardens with their aisles of roses, their falling waters, illumined now by lights that gleamed star-like through leaves and boughs.

"The world's memory is not a faithful one," she said gravely. "If it were—"

"What then ?" he questioned, as she paused.

"What then ! Ah, monsieur, you need not ask. If truth and genius, and fidelity and worth, were things remembered, they would also be things rewarded ; and that they never are *now* !"

"But I am not speaking of things in the abstract ; I am speaking of you. Can you doubt but that your absence will be pain to many—to me at least ? Were it not that the Countess de Verdreuil has invited me to Renonçeux in the autumn, I scarcely know how I should bear it. As it is, the time will be long and weary enough when Paris sees you no longer."

"Paris is too inconstant to feel regret for a memory,"

she answered lightly, though a slight flush of anger rose to her face. Such speeches as these were never welcome to one who had so little vanity and so little interest in them as Vivienne. "And so I think are you, Monsieur d'Orvâl, unless the world belies you very much."

"I may have been," he answered, with unusual earnestness. "But I have learned a better lesson of late than the world has ever taught me, and while I remember *that*, mademoiselle, I remember you."

Vivienne laughed carelessly: these words had so little meaning, so little attraction for her.

"By-the-bye," said the Marquis d'Orvâl presently, "have you ever discovered, mademoiselle, who was that mysterious stranger at the *bal masqué*? The countess was speaking to me on the subject a few days ago. She said her efforts to find out his name or rank had been quite useless."

The obscure light hid the bright flush that burned on Vivienne's cheek as she answered hurriedly,—

"I thought you would have made the discovery long since, as it seemed to distress you so much at the time. You are sure it was not one of your own friends, monsieur?"

"Quite sure," he answered confidently; "I had not mentioned my dress to any one of them, and no one could have copied it so exactly if they had not received some information on the subject."

"Never pride yourself on your originality again, monsieur," said Vivienne, laughing. "I believe you could forgive everything but the fact of this impertinent individual copying your costume, when it had cost you such thought and deliberation. I really felt very sorry for you when I found how it had been wasted."

He bit his lip at her mockery.

"I believe you think me a conceited fool," he muttered angrily; "you are always ridiculing me."

"Oh no, monsieur!" said Vivienne, with sudden gravity; "not so bad as that. I believe you do think a great deal of yourself, but then I suppose it is excusable. The world has made you its *enfant gâté* so long."

"You are very candid," he answered, smiling in spite of himself at her words. "But I think you are right, Mademoiselle St. Maurice. I have been so little accustomed to contradiction, or to the denial of anything on which I have set my heart, that I fear it makes me too ready to believe that to will and to have are one and the same thing with me."

"A dangerous belief, I should imagine," she said gravely, "and one which will not always hold ground."

"I fear so myself, of late," he answered, his languid tones sinking to greater earnestness. "I fear there is one great gift I covet all in vain, and that fear makes me a coward at last. You do not guess what that gift is, mademoiselle?"

"I? No!" she answered calmly, almost indifferently, for she was already wearied of this man's companionship and empty courtesies. "Anything that lies beyond money to purchase, and rank to bribe, Monsieur d'Orvâl?"

"I hope so; for once in all my life I hope so," he answered passionately, as he gazed down at the beautiful, childlike face, with its starry, eloquent eyes. "Oh, Vivienne! can you not even guess what it is? You who have such gracious pity, such infinite gentleness for every living thing, can you not read what tortures I bear? for I am mad enough to love you as I never loved living woman yet. I lay my very life down at your feet, only praying one word to say it is not all in vain—not without hope, Vivienne!"

She turned to him—startled, amazed, angered.

"Monsieur, I have given you no warrant for such hope—no right to address such words to me; and I cannot accept your love. I never even for one moment dwelt upon its possibility!"

"Do not decide too hastily!" he pleaded eagerly, while his eyes dwelt upon her with a yearning love that touched her heart to pity him. "Think what my love can give, for there is nothing I could deny you. Think of the rank, the honours I lay at your feet, unquestioningly—only praying you to take them as a queen takes what is her sovereign right—only beseeching you to look with pity on the heart that is wholly and entirely yours—to listen to my love, and accept it!"

"I cannot," she said simply. "I am sorry, very sorry that you have spoken such words to me. You cannot surely think so ill of me as to imagine I could be bribed to marry you by the rank and wealth and honours you could give me? If so, monsieur, it is time you learnt some women hold their love at too high a value to sell it for a million such advantages as those! A king would never purchase my hand, unless he had first gained my heart!"

Very proudly she spoke; all her childlike beauty moved and stirred into a grave, calm dignity unlike her usual manner.

"And why should I not gain *that*?" he asked earnestly—all his languid conceit, his worldly calmness, swept away by the force of the new feelings her beauty and her gentleness had awakened. "Why should I not win your heart in time? You are so young; you know so little of the world as yet; and if you will only let me try—if you will only give me the faintest word

of hope, I would wait and serve you untiringly only to have the blessed chance of one day calling you mine."

She shook her head gravely, and her eyes rested on his face with the calm, untroubled gentleness of a child. "It could never, *never* be!" she said quietly. "It would be useless pain to you to let you suppose such a thing, even for a moment. No, monsieur, dismiss all thought of it, and let us be friends again—more is impossible."

He was silent for a moment—grievously pained and wounded; for all the best and truest impulses of his nature had been called to life by this love which was valueless in the eyes of the only woman to whom he had ever offered it in real sincerity.

"I can never accept your decision as final, or look upon your love as wholly beyond my power to gain, unless it is given to—another man," he said, at length.

Over all the fairness of her face a warm flush deepened and wavered, and her eyes had a startled, wistful look, as if those words had touched some hidden spring in her nature. "I *wish* you would believe me," she said, with a new softness and sadness in her clear, young voice. "Indeed! indeed! it would be better to forget me; never to look upon my face again, if such hopes are to live in your heart!"

But he noted the wistful eyes, the dreamy softness, the wavering flush, and he said in his heart, "I will not despair. She is such a child: how can she know what love is worth yet?"

"We had better return to the ball-room," she said gently, interrupting his silence at last. "Our absence will be remarked."

He gave her his arm in silence. He could not frame any words at that moment to hide his pain—his wounded pride and disappointed love. Together they entered the ball-room, and the marquis, taking Vivienne to the Countess de Verdreuil's side, bowed gravely, and left her with her chaperon.

"Well, Vivienne, am I to congratulate you?" whispered Blanche, as she noted the flushed cheeks and downcast eyes of her lovely ward.

"On what?" was the answer, as the girl played somewhat nervously with the flowers of her bouquet.

"On your acceptance of the Marquis d'Orvâl, of course. I am sure he has proposed to you, has he not?"

"Yes!"

"The scarlet flush burned deeper, the curled lashes drooped lower, and the girl's voice was nervous and tremulous, for she saw Raoul watching her a short distance off.

"Well, have you no more to say?" asked the countess impatiently.

"No," said Vivienne calmly.

"No! What in the world is the matter with you? Are your conversational powers to be limited to monosyllables?" cried Blanche. "Can you say nothing more than 'yes' or 'no'?" What have you arranged with the Marquis?"

"Nothing!" said the girl calmly, raising her eyes at last from her flowers to the face of her guardian.

"Good heavens, Vivienne! are you mad or an idiot?" exclaimed the countess in a low voice of intense anger. "Nothing! You surely do not mean to say you have been so childish, so foolish, as to refuse him?"

"I do," said Vivienne quietly. "Why should I have done otherwise? The Marquis d'Orvâl is nothing to me!"

"Nothing to you?"

The words left Blanche de Verdreuil's lips with such utter amazement and blank incredulity, that Vivienne could hardly repress a smile.

"*Nothing to you!* To think that the world holds a girl so utterly foolish and absurd as to throw away such a chance—such a position as that of the Marchioness d'Orvâl, the future Duchesse d'Alençon, the most splendid match of the season—for a whim, a fancy so utterly childishly ridiculous as that the man who offers it is *nothing* to her! Vivienne, you really are too trying!"

"I am sorry to displease you, madame," said the girl proudly. "But not for the best match in France—not to please *you* even—could I perjure myself so utterly as to take the name of a wife upon me, while feeling totally indifferent, and unable to fulfil the duties of one."

Blanche was silent from perfect indignation and wrath. She could find no words in which to condemn this worse than folly of which Vivienne had been guilty. It needed all the force of self-control—all the deception of which she was capable—to hide these feelings at the moment. But the eyes of the world were upon her, and she was compelled to subdue them for the time being.

"I see only too plainly how completely I have thrown away all my care and interest in your welfare, Vivienne," she said, in cold, cutting accents which fell like ice on the girl's tender heart. "You are the most ungrateful, foolish creature it has ever been my lot to meet. What is to become of you in the future if you mean to go on in this Quixotic, unreasonable manner, God only knows: I don't."

Then she turned away, to smile her sweetest smiles and scatter her graceful words and airy wit on the group of courtiers she ever managed to assemble in her train, for Blanche de Verdreuil was a popular woman in society now, and used her power s

gracefully and skilfully that she bid fair to keep her place, hard as it had been to win.

Meanwhile Raoul crossed the room and came up to Vivienne as she sat, pained and distressed by the harsh words of the countess, and longing wildly and vainly that she could fly to some solitary place away from the great heartless world which glittered and sparkled around, there to weep over her broken fancies, her impossible dreams, which were being so rudely dispelled, one after another.

"This is our dance, do you care to give it me?" he asked, in those low, musical tones which ever wore a deeper tenderness, a strange gentleness, for her."

"Oh, yes," she said, rising with a faint sigh, and accepting his arm immediately.

"You look tired and troubled," he said, as he led her away. "What has Blanche been saying to vex you? I saw her speaking to you a short time ago."

"She is angry with me because I cannot look upon things as she does," said Vivienne sadly. "She finds me a very troublesome pupil: I know, but what can I do? I cannot be false to my early teachings—my own instincts. Oh, how I wish I had never come to Paris!"

Something so like a sob rose in her throat that Raoul was startled and grieved.

"You are over-wrought—over-excited," he said soothingly. "Come away from here. We will not dance, but go to the gardens instead. The air is so warm it will not hurt you."

She let him lead her where he would with the passive unresisting obedience of a child, and soon they were wandering together among the arcades of roses, the flower-bordered parterres, and softly-shaded lights of the beautiful gardens, whither many of the guests had already strayed.

"Now tell me," said Raoul de Verdreuil, as he folded the soft scarlet cashmere round the girl's slight figure, to protect her from the night air, "tell me what has distressed you so much; perhaps I can help you."

But a strange restraint seemed to curb Vivienne's confidence, and she hesitated for some minutes, while he walked beside her, patiently awaiting her words.

"It is so little," she said at length, while the colour faded from her face, and the strange, shy fear in her voice pained him immeasurably,—*"so little with which to trouble you, monsieur. The countess is often vexed with me because I cannot think and act as she wishes; and then I am so grieved to think I cannot return her kindness to me by an unquestioning obedience. Only some stronger power withholds me, some inborn principle prompts*

me to do what I know and feel is right, and then—*that* somehow never agrees with what the world calls right, monsieur."

He smiled at her innocent words.

"I have no doubt of that," he said; "the countess and yourself look at life from two opposite points of view, and I should imagine were never likely to agree unless you, mademoiselle, lost your purity and clear-sighted instincts (which heaven forefend!), or Blanche underwent a kind of moral earthquake respecting all her views of life—social, moral, and conventional. And is this *all* your trouble?"

She was silent and embarrassed. Lie to him she could not; equivocate she dared not; yet how could she tell him of the maquis and his love—of the Countess de Verdreuil's indignation, and her own refusal of this brilliant offer?

"Not quite all," she said, with that strange, new-born shyness which saddened and perplexed him; "but all I can tell you, monsieur."

She would not use any of those semi-falsehoods with which society cloaks its unmentionable truths; she would not use those dainty *equivokes*, which are to the world as masks in the ball of life. No—better to pain him by withheld confidence than deceive him by anything not wholly truth. That he was pained she knew only too soon by the shadow on his brow, the coldness of his reply, as he said,—

"Of course I have no wish to force your confidence, mademoiselle; only I am sorry to find you cannot trust me sufficiently to feel certain I should never abuse it."

"Oh, do not think *that*," she cried earnestly, in real distress; "I do trust you most wholly and entirely, monsieur; only—" she paused, while the rich colour burned deeper and deeper in her cheeks—"only do you not know there are some things a woman cannot well speak of without seeming to betray another's trust?"

"Only love affairs," he said carelessly, though a gleam of suppressed anger lit his eyes. "Of course, if your secret is an *affaire du cœur*, mademoiselle, it is not for me to allude to it. You will let me know when I am to congratulate you, I hope."

"Most assuredly," she answered coldly, stung to the quick by his indifferent tone, and hurt that he could so misunderstand her. "Only it will not be just yet, Monsieur de Verdreuil. My choice has to be made, and you know I am difficult to please."

"I fear it will be a case of *embarras des richesses*," he said in the same tone. "Mademoiselle St. Maurice has so many sighing for the honour of selection that I feel curious at times to know on whom it will fall."

The bright colour faded from her face, and the soft eyes were

shadowed with painful thoughts. Why did he speak so cruelly? she wondered. Had he, too, mistaken her nature? Could he not read her better than to imagine she would link her fate and give her heart to any one of these butterflies of fashion who beset her path from day to day? She was silent and pained, and, as she walked slowly beside him, all the regret and sorrow of her heart shadowed the brilliance of her face and deepened its melancholy. Raoul saw the change, and it touched him to a swift, fierce anger for his own words—a passionate scorn for the jealous weakness that had prompted them.

"Forgive me," he said more gently; "I did not mean to vex you. I did not think of what I was saying."

She turned her beautiful eyes on him with that sweet humility he knew so well shining in their depths.

"Forgive?" she said, half unconsciously; "what is there I would not forgive *you*? Only I thought you at least understood me better than to think for one moment such thoughts as your words expressed."

A world of tenderness flashed in his eyes at those simple words. A great longing came over him to tell her of his jealous fears, to set his doubts at once and for ever at rest; but even as the words rose hot and swift, and tremulous with eager hopes, to his lips, a low musical laugh fell on their ears; and, starting at the sound, they saw coming towards them Blanche de Verdreuil and the Marquis d'Orvâl.

"Ah, truants! so I have found you at last?" said Blanche. "Vivienne, the marquis has been looking for you in vain. He says you promised him this waltz. If you care to dance it, do so; if not, we will go home, for it is late enough, and the dawn is already rebuking us. Come, decide; which shall it be?"

"I think I would rather not dance any more, if Monsieur d'Orvâl will excuse me," said Vivienne. "I am already fatigued, and it is so intensely hot in the ball-room. I would rather go home, madame."

"Very well," said Blanche de Verdreuil, as she quietly released her companion's arm. "You heard my ward's decision, monsieur?"

"Yes, and bow to mademoiselle's wishes as commands," answered the marquis, in accents of unfeigned regret. "Permit me, then, the honour of conducting you to your carriage, Mademoiselle St. Maurice," he continued, as he saw Blanche turn and speak to Raoul.

Vivienne accepted his arm without a word, and he led her away through the glittering avenues of trees, leaving the countess to follow at her leisure.

"Come, monsieur," she said lightly to Raoul de Verdreuil,

"you must be my knight perforce. But poor Léon deserves his chances ; he has been a perfect model of constancy in his devotion to Vivienne throughout this season. I expect, before we leave Paris, to hear that she is to be the Marchioness d'Orval. A brilliant prospect, is it not, monsieur ?"

"Do you think she cares for him, then ?" asked Raoul de Verdreuil suddenly.

"Cares !" echoed Blanche, elevating her eyebrows in feigned astonishment. "*Pardieu*, monsieur, who *cares* for the man she marries now-a-days ? Vivienne has the true wisdom of her sex. She knows how to use her opportunities, and will probably make the best bargain with the world that lies in her power."

"You misjudge her, I think," said Raoul coldly ; "Vivienne is different to most women, and I do not fear she will make a mercenary marriage."

"Do you not ?" questioned Blanche with well-assumed indifference. "*Eh bien*, monsieur ! Time will show which of us is correct in our surmises."

Raoul was silent, but his heart burned with a new fierce pain, and that night brought him neither sleep nor rest.

"Am I fool enough to believe this woman ?" he muttered to himself, as he sat alone in his room, and watched the daylight glowing in the eastern sky, while yet no slumber would visit his aching eyes or calm the restless fever in his veins. "Am I fool enough to trust what *she* says, when I know the purity of that perfect life ?"

CHAPTER III.

TREACHERY.

"She's beautiful, and therefore to be wooed ;
She is a woman—therefore to be won."

Shakspcare.

THE great world of fashion had grown weary of Paris at last, and left the city to the heat and dust and scorching glare of the blinding summer sunshine. It blazed on the white glitter of the houses, the smooth pavements of the streets ; it throbbed with fiercest heat on thoroughfares still filled with ceaseless traffic and endless toil—on panting horses laden with heavy burdens—on men toiling and labouring from dawn of day to close of night—on all the mockery of summer in a great

city, when the blue skies blind with their cloudless brilliance, and the fierce sunlight dazzles and consumes with scorching heat, and no breath of sweet, pure air fans the pale cheeks, and cools the fevered brow of those condemned to remain pent up in their close prisons of poverty, and shame, and want.

The season was over. Rank and fashion had fled to the cool seas and sunny lakes and luminous skies of other lands and other climes. The reign of pleasure was over: it is only the reign of toil that knows no end—that will know no end while the world drags on its days.

Once more the Château of Renonçieux was thrown open. Once more through its stately avenues and shady terraces wandered groups of fair women, idling the summer hours away in indolent enjoyment and languid content. Through the scented aisles of the rose-gardens, and amidst the murmur of the fountains, floated the sound of happy laughter; and over the velvet sward and marble terraces glided the dainty feet and sweeping robes of Blanche de Verdreuil's guests.

Never before had such a brilliant and titled assemblage congregated at the château since Blanche had become its mistress, and the fair châtelaine taxed her powers to the uttermost to interest and surprise and amuse them as the days passed swiftly by.

There were riding-parties, excursions, moonlight fêtes, balls, theatricals, festivities without end. And amidst the gaiety and the pleasure crowding all the days, and filling all the nights, heartaches and jealousies, bitter passions and black treachery were at work, and evil days were brooding over Renonçieux, as a storm broods over a fair, bright landscape in the splendour of a summer noon.

Albert and Vivienne had met again, and that meeting had brought keen pain to the young artist. She was unchanged in much, he saw. She had still the dreamy, poetic thoughtfulness, the tender purity, the spiritual grace of the girl who had listened to his music in the organ-gallery of the château, and been so constantly and dangerously associated with him in every hope, in every memory, in every dream of his heart since; but the cloudless serenity, the perfect peace of her nature had been tampered with, and the former unrestrained intimacy no longer reigned between them.

And Albert was puzzled, and perplexed too, by the change in Raoul. He was grave almost to sternness. His mention of Vivienne was ever rare and guarded, and though he listened to and encouraged Albert's confidence as in days of yore, if ever the subject turned to Vivienne, he shrank visibly from it, and, even if he listened, rarely volunteered any opinions of his own as to

her heart being attached to any of her admirers as Albert jealously fancied. To both the friends there had come that chilling restraint, that struggle with what seems disloyalty, that only a woman's smile can light in men's hearts, only a woman's influence breathe and fan to one consuming fire within them.

Only a short time before their confidence had been perfect, their faith complete, their love most true and loyal; and now a shadow had fallen on their hearts, the old familiar intercourse was restrained, and if possible avoided; yet each hid the pain and stifled the jealousy which they read all too well for their own peace, their long, untroubled friendship.

To Raoul de Verdreuil life now was a strange, undisciplined longing for the sight of one face, the sound of one voice. With every morning he rose with this thought—he should see her again. He did not pause to analyze what he felt—to read the meaning of this subtle intoxication of the senses, this restless fever of mind and body, which banished peace, and launched his life on a sea of tempestuous passion. His strength had been so great all his life before, his self-control so strong, his pride so immovable, that they cast him into more utter captivity now for their long restraint upon his heart and nature.

He was stricken powerless by a thousand new emotions—by the light in a girl's soft eyes as they met his own—by the smile on her lips, which, as it greeted him, puzzled and perplexed, and yet dazzled his eyes with its tender, poetic beauty. His life was suddenly confused and transfigured from all its wonted calm; and yet, as he drifted towards the danger of this sudden overmastering passion, he sternly told himself it could never be realized, never be returned. He even strove to blind himself to the tumult in his heart, the madness in his soul, which were so mingled and so nameless, he still called them—friendship.

Yet he wondered, at times, how the interests of his political life had palled upon him so utterly—how, in the midnight solitude of his chamber, his thoughts turned from the tangled webs of diplomacy, the subtle workings of finesse, and dwelt ever and always on one pure, sweet face—the face of a woman with the grace and purity of scarce departed childhood lingering on it and around it; and vague, dreamy thoughts, half stormy, and at times half sad, took possession of his heart, and in his dreams of life now there stole the sorcery and the sweetness of a passion never felt, or even imagined, before—a passion grand and lofty, pure and stainless, which lived for one object, and cherished but one thought—the happiness of what it loved. And in such moments as these Raoul would pace his room with fevered, restless steps, and tell himself again and again that, if Vivienne's love was not for him, he would resign it cheerfully. In such

moments he would declare that his friend's claim was too sacred to be interfered with by word or look of his.

And thinking of the loyal trust of the boy-artist, the pure and faithful worship he had rendered this girl, Raoul de Verdreuil curbed and restrained himself with all the force and might of his iron will, and never betrayed to Vivienne St. Maurice the love that was wasting his life and consuming his heart with the fever of its own desires, the torture of its passionate unrest.

* * * *

A sweet summer night ; a night on which fall the last lingering notes of a singer's voice through the open windows of Blanche de Verdreuil's pretty theatre at the château.

The guests are assembled there to witness an opera produced by the joint exertions and indefatigable zeal of Albert Hoffmann and Vivienne St. Maurice. She has taken the chief part, and acted and sung with a grace and pathos and *abandon* wholly marvellous and bewildering in one usually so shy and reserved. But there is genius in the girl—genius that would glorify the most trivial part she undertook, and that made her throw herself heart and soul into the character she played, into the music she sang, to-night.

It is for Albert's sake, and she exerts herself not for others, but for him ; and the result is a success beyond her hopes, a success which her genius claims apart from her beauty and her popularity with the audience, whose critical tastes are more than satisfied.

The music comes in for its fair meed of approbation also. The languid *dilettanti* speak in wonder of the power and grandeur of the work they have heard. A few marvel why the young composer does not give it to the world, and let its merits gain him fame and triumph by their own intrinsic worth ; and while they talk and wonder, and criticize actors and singers again and again, Vivienne is standing in her dressing-room, with the flush of her late triumph on her fair face, and the light and brilliance of excitement sparkling in her eyes.

Standing there, the girl seemed to forget all her life, all her past, all her present, and to wake to the consciousness of a new power, sublime and grand and intoxicating. She felt that in her was the fire of genius, the passion and fervour of art, and the knowledge sprang to life by the rapid, unerring instinct of genius alone. It was born—not of the flattery and the praises so lavishly bestowed, not of the self-confidence of a first success—but of the influence and force of a new power, long latent, and now called into life by its first exercise, its first unaided and intoxicating triumph.

“I could do so much, she said softly to herself, as she moved

backwards and forwards through the length of the room, too restless to keep still, too excited to remain quiet,—“so much—so much; and yet I am bound down to this inert, passive existence for two more years. Oh! why was I so foolish as to promise what I did? Why did I chain myself down so utterly to Blanche de Verdreuil’s guardianship? The tie grows daily more irksome, the restraint more severe, and yet it seems to me that to break one or other must needs seem a sin to the dead. Oh, grand’mère! if you can see me now, you must see also how hard it is to keep that promise—how little there is to bind me to this life—how much to tempt me from it!”

A knock startled her from these thoughts; a summons reached her from without, and recalled her to herself again. With a strange reluctance she obeyed it—a reluctance new to her till now, for she felt as if the flatteries and praises she would receive from the world must jar on the consecration of her thoughts to an art she had always deemed divine, and that now seemed doubly so. But she roused herself from her ecstatic dreams, her glorious visions. She changed her dress, and then swept with her usual tranquil grace back to the crowded rooms, where the audience she had enchanted were still discussing and marvelling at her powers.

Apart from the rest—his eager eyes fixed on her, his face bright with a new reverence and adoration—stood Albert Hoffmann. He had given her no praise, spoken no thanks, for it seemed to him now that the force and genius of this girl rendered such poor tribute as mere words a mockery of admiration.

Breathed through her—shadowed forth by her—all his vague, poetic dreams had taken life, had become great beyond all dreams of greatness. Her voice, her gestures, her impassioned acting, had given to his own creations such rich, warm, glowing life, such pure and eloquent meaning, that they startled even himself with a grandeur of conception that hitherto had been to him only an ideal meaning. If even the listless, ironical, surfeited temperaments of the assembled guests were enthralled and aroused to enthusiasm, it was little wonder that the composer himself, whose heart was so devoted to his art and all belonging to it, should find no words—should deem all praises weak—should only, when her eyes sought his, let the silent eloquence of a look speak all the burdened passion of his full heart, and give her no other thanks as she at last stood beside him.

Her face was pale now—her eyes heavy and languid. The after-effects of excitement, the force with which genius ever recoils upon itself, were becoming apparent, and Albert’s quick eyes noted the signs with sudden pain.

“You are wearied, Vivienne; you have taxed your strength

too severely," he said, with that sweet sympathy which love teaches. "Can you not rest now? See, every one is leaving."

"I am a little tired," she said wearily; "but, as the guests are leaving, I shall soon be able to retire also."

"Will you come out on the terrace for a moment?" asked Albert. "It is far pleasanter than these hot rooms."

"Very well," she said, with a sudden tremor in her voice that startled him; "let us go!"

He did not know that she had seen Raoul's dark, grave eyes fixed sternly and coldly on her, as he stood in the shadow of the curtained windows at the other end of the room; he did not guess that her heart was aching and throbbing with pain, because Raoul alone had given her no praise, had uttered no word of thanks or pleasure; that there echoed and lingered in her memory one silvery, playful whisper of Blanche de Verdreuil's as she had murmured in her ear,—

"You were admirable, *ma chère*, in your part; only Raoul thinks your acting somewhat too *prononcée* in style; he says it would do very well for the Théâtre Lyrique in Paris, but he never imagined you were so fitted for the stage before. To tell you the truth, Vivienne, he does not approve of your display at all."

And those words had poisoned all her triumph—had spoilt all her enjoyment—had rankled in her heart, and turned its innocent pleasure into keenest pain. Raoul's disapprobation, at the very moment when her whole nature was stirred and roused within her by the force and fervour of these new, vivid, impassioned feelings! It was as gall and wormwood to their sweetness. She went out into the still balmy night, with all its scents of flowers and foliage. She was very silent, very still, and Albert stood by her side silent as herself. Amidst the pain and the fever of her thoughts, she gave no heed to him; he was utterly and entirely forgotten. But with the breath of the summer air, and the beauty of the summer night, a sudden calm hushed her, a sudden peace stole over her.

Wrapped in that starlit loveliness, while the moonlight slept in tranquil beauty over the dewy earth, a whisper stole to her and soothed the restless fever within her breast. All the pure, sweet faith, the dreaming, passionate idyls of a love not conscious, not wholly known, stirred her heart from its slumbers. In the eyes gazing out at the shadows, where the moon's rays fell, a new light gathered—a new beauty shone—the "light that never yet was upon land or sea," the beauty that only shines in a woman's eyes when she loves—and loves her best.

* * * *

In a room within, Blanche de Verdreuil lingered by Raoul's side.

In the subdued light she noted how white and stern he looked, and she knew what feelings were at work in his heart—what jealousy and pain were rending and torturing him within. A fierce joy took possession of her; a cruel, vengeful delight throbbed and quivered in her veins. Such pain, such torture had long been hers; now she could deal it back in full and perfect measure to him.

They were quite alone; there were no eyes to watch, no curious ears to hear the words that passed between them. Slowly and sweetly her voice stole on his ear; slowly and surely the dark fears and jealous doubts of his own heart were met and strengthened and assured.

"You are *sure* of this?" he said suddenly, as he turned fiercely to her, his hand clasping her arm in momentary forgetfulness of all save the agony her words dealt to him.

"Sure—only too sure," she said softly and regretfully. "Her refusal of the Marquis d'Orvâl, and many other splendid offers she has received, angered me excessively. I insisted upon knowing the reason, and at last discovered it. Vivienne loves this young Galahad—this champion to whom she owes her present life, her present position, her rescue from poverty and obscurity; and loves him so well, too, that she refuses all other advantages, honours, and dignities for his sake; loves him as women only love once in their lives—as she will never love again."

He was silent; words would not come now his own fears were realized, his own doubts assured—now that the fierce, cruel pain within his heart told him the folly of his long blindness.

"It is quite an idyl of love—a poem, a fairy-tale, in these prosaic days," went on the low, sweet voice of his persecutor; "and I had not the heart to be angry with the girl for her folly—for folly it assuredly is, to love a dreamer, an idler, a visionary, such as Albert Hoffmann. But they are both young; a few years' waiting will not harm them; and I, as Vivienne's guardian, will of course see she has sufficient settled on herself to keep her in the position she now occupies."

Raoul hardly heard her words; the fierce pain within deafened and blinded him to all reason in this moment. He threw up the window, as if the heat of the room would stifle him. On the terrace without stood two figures, silent and engrossed, while the moon's rays fell on the upturned face and rapt, earnest eyes of one. It was that of Albert Hoffmann.

With a sudden, swift movement he turned to Blanche and seized her hands in both his own.

"Answer me," he said—his voice hoarse and broken, despite his efforts at self-control—"answer me truly, this once, as you

hope for mercy yourself in the world to come: did she—Vivienne—tell you she loved Albert?"

"*She did!*"

Not a jar in the clear tones; not a false ring in the sweet, low voice; and yet Blanche knew the words were utterly, wholly false—knew she *lied* to him.

His face paled; his hands shook; a quiver ran through the strong, erect form.

"That is enough," he said hoarsely.

He dropped her hands and turned away with the slow, uneven step of a man half-stunned by a sudden blow.

"Stop!"

He stood at the door amazed. His father was leaning against it, his face white and stern, his whole frame trembling with passion and wrath.

"Stop, Raoul! a word with you, ere you go."

"Certainly," answered his son, wearily; "I am at your service, sir."

The soft noise of a closing door, the noiseless gliding of a woman's step at the further end of the room, was unheard by either of them. Blanche de Verdreuil had seen that meeting; she knew her schemes were working as she wished.

"Come in here!" continued the old count sternly, as he entered the deserted room. "Now tell me—what words were those you spoke to *my wife*? How dared you forget my honour—hers—your own—and pour out the vile protestations of a shameless love in her pure ears? Do you think I am a dotard—blind and deaf and helpless—that I cannot avenge dishonour even now, though one foot is in the grave? Do you think I have been blind to your arts, your schemes? By heaven, Raoul! you shall answer to me for every word you have uttered to *her*, for every thought with which you seek to pollute an honoured home! Answer me, if you can, or the very lowest of my household shall turn you from my doors this very hour!"

Raoul gazed at him in such utter amazement, such incredulous wonder, that for a moment it curbed and restrained his anger.

"Father! such words from *you* to me!"

The very gentleness of the rebuke stung the old man afresh.

"Such words! Were every word a scourge to lash you, it would be too weak for punishment such as you merit!"

"But tell me, what have I done?" cried Raoul, in such an agony of bewilderment and entreaty that it startled the old man, though it never touched his heart to any belief in his son's innocence.

"Your pretended ignorance is of little avail," he said scornfully. "A few words will unveil your infamy. Years

before I married Blanche you knew her. That you loved her I do not doubt, though you denied it. When you met her here as my wife you favoured me with a tissue of falsehoods respecting her, which I refused to credit; you then refused to live here any longer, and absented yourself for years, voluntarily estranging yourself from me and withdrawing all your previous confidence. I made no remark. I let you act as you would. But since you were in Paris, since once again you voluntarily took up your abode with me, your conduct has entirely changed. You have sought and followed my wife in a manner that has drawn down the remarks of the world on us both—on me for my blindness, on you for your guilt. I long turned a deaf ear to the whispers that reached me. You were my son, and I deemed your honour stainless as my own. But of late—here at Renonçeux—I have watched you myself. You are ever by Blanche's side, in Blanche's presence. To-night my suspicions became certainty. Did I not see you just now—your agitation, your grief, your looks, as you held her hands in yours? Ob, God! it maddens me to think of it. Nay, no word; would you have me disbelieve the evidence of my own senses? I know you for a villain, Raoul; I look upon you as no son of mine, you traitor to all truth! One word more: leave my roof for ever, and never, while I live, shall my eyes look forgiveness on your false face again!"

His voice literally shook with rage and passion, and Raoul, as he listened in utter amazement, saw at last the pitfall into which his heedless feet had fallen. He remembered now the thousand excuses and projects framed by Blanche to keep him near her of late—the countless demands upon his time and attention, to which he had submitted for Vivienne's sake. Falsehood wore the garb of truth; deceit and suspicion had inveigled him into this dilemma, and how to clear himself he knew not.

"It is all false!" he said at last. "God forgive you that ever such base suspicions found dwelling-place or belief in your heart! I never thought to hear living man apply the word *dishonoured* to me!"

"You cannot deny it; you cannot say that I speak without foundation for my words," said his father fiercely. "Prove to me your innocence. Have you not haunted her footsteps, sought her side? Did I not see you just now, as I entered this very room, your hands clasping hers; your words, your looks, your very actions proclaiming the passion of your heart? If these things speak for your innocence, it looks to me strangely like guilt. Had I not met you as I did at this very moment, I might have doubted all I had heard; but I doubt no longer, Raoul; and I say we had better part from this night forward. The same home can no longer shelter us both."

"And you believe I love your wife?—I?"

Raoul spoke with such scorn, such amazement, that for the first time a doubt of his guilt crept into the old man's heart, and made itself heard despite his jealous passions: but he answered sternly,—

"I do believe it. I doubted it until to-night; I doubt no longer. My heart is wrung with shame and agony, that I must say to my only son, to the last who bears my name—let us part, and that soon, ere a worse thing come to us."

Raoul looked at him—pity for his weakness, anger for his base suspicions, mingling with the love and reverence he bore him.

"Since you can think such thoughts, and harbour such doubts, it is indeed time we part," he said. "You are my father—that I cannot forget, and that alone forbids me to say what I would have said, had any other man applied such words to me as you have done. Nay, do not speak again, or I may for once be tempted to forget your years and our relationship, and answer you as man to man—not as son to father! I leave you to your own belief. Time alone can prove how utterly untrue and unworthy it is. Some day you will know my honour stainless—then, and only then can I refute this charge—then also these words which you have spoken will come back to your memory, and with them remorse—if not forgiveness!"

He paused; but the stern face never relaxed. The old man was unmoved—unpitying—inexorable.

"At least let us part friends," entreated Raoul, forgetting all save that this was his father, and that they might never meet in life again. "You will not refuse me your hand?"

There was no answer, no sign. The stern face looked harder, colder, more inflexible than ever. Raoul's own face paled till it was white as death. He asked no more, he said no word—he bowed his head, and left the old man standing there relentless—unforgiving still.

Only when his step echoed in the distance, and died away in the silence of the late night, did the Count de Verdreuil's face relax—did the worn and aged form unbend from its haughty dignity; and the old man bent his head, and in a sudden paroxysm of remorse and grief, tears—weak, childish tears—rolled down his cheeks. It is sad to see age weep. It was sad to see him now in his trouble and distress, his pain and perplexity. His strength gave way—his pride snapped like a bow overstrained.

"Oh! my wife, my wife!" he cried. "God forgive you if you have deceived me now. Heaven pardon you if I have wronged my son—my only son—for your sake!"

And the wife he loved so idolatrously, that for her sake he had wronged a noble, stainless heart, and banned a life as pure and upright as his own with the shame and stigma of dishonour—that wife cowered, trembling and terror-stricken, in her own dainty room, whither she had fled at the first sound of that strife between father and son, which she had planned and provoked.

Doubly perjured—doubly false—her victory brought her no pleasure ; her revenge was remorseful, even in its first moments of success. To the woman who said from this night forward, “ Evil, be thou my good ! ” there was neither rest, nor peace, nor reward. Her own hand was shaping out her own punishment. The wrong she was working out for others would inevitably recoil on herself.

CHAPTER IV

“ TO BE WROTH WITH ONE WE LOVE.”

“ Alas ! they had been friends in youth,
But whispering tongues can poison truth ;
And constancy lives in realms above,
And life is thorny, and youth is vain :
And to be wroth with one we love
Doth work like madness in the brain.”

Coleridge.

THE dawn was breaking in the eastern sky, grey and chill and colourless ; the sun had not warmed the heavens yet, and no flush of light or radiance had penetrated the morning mists, or swept them from the earth below.

Albert Hoffmann lay sleeping, after a night of intense excitement—of vague, wild hopes—of new ambitions, tinged with the rose-hues of a first success, and the pure, sweet fancies of a first love. His face was colourless, and tinged with that deep melancholy that often comes with sleep, when mind and body have laid aside the strain of long and feverish excitement. As he lay in that profound, dreamless slumber, the door of his room opened softly, and Raoul de Verdreuil entered.

He was dressed for travelling, and his face in the dim, shadowy light, looked pale and colourless as marble, while all its eager fire and dauntless light had changed to a serene and infinite melancholy, that told only too well of the pain at heart, the struggle with himself, the warfare of fierce and terrible passions that the night had witnessed.

He approached the bed, and bent over the sleeper, undecided whether to waken him from that dreamless rest. But even as he doubted and waited there, silent and uncertain, Albert stirred and moved; then, with a faint sigh, opened his eyes, and met that weary gaze of his friend as it rested on his face.

"Raoul!"

He sprang up, awake, half-fearful of some evil that had happened.

"What is it?" he said eagerly, sleep banished in an instant by the sudden fear at his heart. "Has anything happened, Raoul? Why, you are already dressed! Is it so late?"

"Don't be alarmed, Albert,"—and Raoul seated himself beside him, and his voice was calm and passionless as ever. "I have only come to wish you good-bye. I am summoned to Paris. Look here!" He drew a large official document from his coat, and showed it him. "This came last night, and I must attend to it. I have already neglected my duties too long. I want you to make my adieux for me to the countess and her guests, and—Mademoiselle St. Maurice."

Albert noticed how he hesitated over that one name.

"I cannot wait till they are up; but you will excuse me, I know; and, Albert, say good-bye to me *now*—for it may be long before we meet again."

"Raoul!" cried his friend in unconcealed astonishment. "There is something the matter, I know. Tell me what it is—trust me, dear Raoul! There is something that troubles and perplexes you. Will you not let me hear it? We had no secrets unshared *once*."

Raoul was silent. A heart-sick misery was making his life desolate, yet he could tell to no one the base suspicions which had forced him from his father's roof—which had turned the loyal faith of his father's heart to distrust and anger. No, not even to Albert could he repeat those words, whose fiery shame tortured him—words he could never forget, even if he might learn to pardon them in years to come.

"Albert," he said calmly, "I have a secret to keep which I cannot tell to living soul, not even to you. You must not think I am unkind to refuse you my confidence. My secret concerns another as well as myself, and my own heart alone must hold it. And now my time is short. One word and I must leave you. There has been a coldness and restraint between us of late; the fault was mine. I know my folly now, and, knowing it, I see at last how far worthier you are of the gift I was mad enough to covet once. You know what I mean, and I want you to know also, that I pray for your happiness and *hers*, as I

never in all my life prayed for anything yet. I want you to tell her this from me as your friend and hers ; and I want you to forget all the coldness and withheld confidence of these past months, and look upon me still as your truest and most faithful friend ; and you must not think it strange if I am absent a long time now, or if years pass before we can meet. Try to think of me at my best, and remember that, whatever the world says of me, I am not wholly bad. Promise me this !”

A mist of tears rose in the clear, boyish eyes at the unconscious tenderness of those tones.

“ Oh ! Raoul !” he pleaded, “ if you would only trust me, if you would only tell me your trouble, I might help you. Is it— is it about *her*—Vivienne ?”

“ No, no !” he cried eagerly, almost fiercely. “ Do not think that, do not fear that. It is a trouble you cannot share, otherwise I would not have resisted your entreaties. And now I must go ; it is daylight already, and I have no time to lose. Farewell !”

He held out both his hands with a yearning gesture, which showed more than anything else how his calm, self-controlled nature was shaken and aroused—how the longing for love and sympathy broke out through all his efforts at restraint. Albert gave him his hands in silence ; he was too startled, too distressed, for any other appeal to come to his lips. That some strange, sudden ill had befallen his friend he could not doubt. But as he felt the warm, familiar grasp—as he gazed at the weary, colourless face from which all the light and gladness of life seemed fled—his heart cried out in one last appeal,—

“ Oh, Raoul, let me help you ! let me know your grief. Your looks, your presence here, are all so strange, I shall know no peace when you are gone.”

“ You will have *her*,” he said, simply, with a smile so sad, it had a deeper pathos than tears. “ She will comfort and console you better than anything else. Ask no more, for I can tell you nothing. God bless you, and give you all happiness. And now once more—Farewell !”

He winning his hands, and, ere Albert could speak another word, was gone, leaving him, bewildered and distressed, to wonder over what had passed, and perplex himself with theories innumerable for his friend's extraordinary conduct.

So while the closed casements of the château shut out the morning light, and the sunrise swept over the east, and the birds woke to chant the praises of a new day, Raoul de Verdreuil mounted his horse, and rode slowly away from the home he had loved so long—the home he had been driven from by the shame of a terrible and unmerited dishonour.

There was wonder and loudly-expressed astonishment at the news of Raoul's abrupt departure when Albert Hoffman related it at the breakfast-table that morning. No suspicion of such a thing had crossed the minds of any of the guests at Renonçeux. Only by *two* of those seated at the table was the news already expected—the Count de Verdreuil and his wife.

Matchless actress as she was, Blanche felt her cheeks pale as she heard that Raoul had left, but her husband's eyes were fixed eagerly and searchingly upon her, and she summoned all her self-command, and forced herself to smile and talk and be as gay and brilliant as usual, murmuring, with cold indifference, that Raoul was always eccentric—never to be depended on—that she had half-expected him to leave them suddenly—his stay had already been so unusually long. And then she skillfully turned the conversation to other matters, and this strange departure was alluded to no more. But a thrill of savage joy swept through her heart as her eyes rested on Vivienne, and noted how deadly pale she turned, how some inward pain shadowed all the brightness of her eyes as she heard of Raoul's absence, and remembered he had spoken no parting word, had left her no farewell, for Albert kept his message to give her when alone.

The meal went on, however, in spite of the heart-aches and misery throbbing beneath the laughter and the words of those assembled; and if some noticed Vivienne's extreme quiet, and Blanche de Verdreuil's feverish gaiety, and the old count's stern, grave face, they never thought of attributing these facts to the news they had just heard.

The long hours of that day dragged on; how weary and how painful they were to Vivienne she alone knew. The Count de Verdreuil shut himself up in solitude; Blanche exerted herself to interest and amuse her guests, and invented schemes for their enjoyment, as if she dreaded a moment's quiet, or a moment's peace, that could give her time to think; and at last Albert Hoffmann sought Vivienne's side, and told her of his pain and perplexity regarding Raoul; she listened with a coldness and restraint altogether new to her, and it seemed to Albert so like indifference that his heart beat high with hope, and he said to himself, "She cannot care for Raoul, as I once feared; she seems to have scarcely any interest for his affairs; his absence apparently makes no difference to her; how foolish I have been to fear it!"

But through all that day the girl battled with this new pain, this sudden weariness of heart, this fierce, intolerable longing for one look, one word from the man who had left her so carelessly and coldly; when night came at last, and the noise and

laughter and the tumult of the many voices died away, and she was free to tear the mask from her face, she threw herself on her knees by the open window of her room, and gave vent to a torrent of passionate grief, long pent up, long restrained, but whose very agony taught her at last the secret of her heart ; that bore her away from the shadow-land of fancies and of dreams, of pure, untroubled thoughts, and innocent, unquestioning enjoyment ; that showed her she was a child no longer. In this hour she learnt the mingled torture, and sweetness, and shame of a woman's love when she knows that love unsought, yet cannot ever again with draw it.

The moonlight streamed through the window, its softened radiance falling on her bowed head and masses of loosened hair, on the white, speechless agony of the young, fair face upturned for one swift moment to the starlit heavens, then bending lower and lower, as if with the agony of its own shame, the knowledge of its own secret. So the moonlight left her, so the grey dawn found her, as the hours passed swiftly, silently along ; while she was all unconscious of their flight in this new pain that had come to her heart and shadowed her life.

CHAPTER V

COULD LOVE PART THUS ?

“ Could love part thus,
Was it not well to speak,
To have spoken once ? ”

Tennyson.

A WEEK had passed since Raoul de Verdreuil had left Renonçieux. A week during which a strange shadow, a strange cloud seemed to have fallen over the gaiety and brightness of the life at the château.

Since his son's departure a settled gloom had changed the Count de Verdreuil's open, cheerful manner, to one unsettled, troubled, and spiritless. He was never seen to smile. Some heavy care weighed upon his brow, and lined and furrowed his cheeks ; and whispers went about of how at night, when the guests had separated and the lights were extinguished, and peace and darkness brooded over all, he would be seen wandering through the passages and galleries, candle in hand, and entering one room, a little room on the right of the grand reception-salons ; and there he would sit for hours, never moving or stir-

ring till the daylight roused him to himself once more, when he would wander back as he came, more like an uneasy ghost than a living man ; and whispers went about of his failing health, and his failing mind, which daily grew more weak and childish, and the guests grew weary of the dulness of the château, and the forced, uncertain spirits of their hostess, and one by one they left it until it was almost deserted.

There were strange rumours, too, coming no one knew how or whence, concerning the ward of the Countess de Verdreuil. Some said she was a peasant-girl born on the estate ; others that Blanche had a deeper interest and nearer relationship to her than was supposed ; and Vivienne noticed the cold faces, and scornful words that were often visible, and scarcely concealed beneath the mask of courtesy ; noticed them with a dim wonder, a strange, listless indifference that sprang only from the pain of her heart and the weariness of her life as it was now.

One hot September noon she came to the music-gallery, where Albert Hoffman was altering and improving the score of the opera she had sung so successfully. She entered so quietly that he did not notice her till she went over to the window, and stood leaning half-wearily against it, while the soft light enfolded her, making her look beautiful beyond all words as his eyes rested on her face. A flush of eager delight rose to his own ; of late she had seemed to avoid him, and that she should at last voluntarily seek his favourite haunt, as in their old days of confidence and friendship, was to him a pleasure such as he rarely knew. He saw how pale she looked in the full radiance of the bright, soft light, and a swift pain shot through his heart. As he watched her she turned listlessly towards him.

"Are you busy, Albert?" she said ; "don't let me disturb you. I only came here because it is so quiet and so cool."

Albert's heart gave a throb of pain and disappointment at her languid, careless words ; then he said—

"You never disturb me, Vivienne ; surely you know that all too well ! Your presence is the deepest joy my life can know."

She was silent. Indeed she scarcely heard him. Her thoughts were far away. Her heart was weary and oppressed. Trouble, vague and nameless, was shadowing her life, and she had brought the thoughts and the troubles here. She had come to think them out in the solitude she had found so often—in the room of all others she loved the best.

"Play to me," she said suddenly, never turning her eyes away from the wide sweep of the park before her and the beautiful avenue of trees beyond ; and Albert rose and went to the organ without a word,

Looking at the slender figure leaning there with the light from the stained glass falling so richly around it, he thought of the time when first he had seen her in a like attitude—in her poor peasant's dress and dusty shoes, but yet so beautiful in it all, that the rough coarse garments could not hide her natural grace, or delicate loveliness. Involuntarily his fingers wandered into the same air he had played to her then—only weaving into its tender melody now the passionate longings of his great, unspoken love—the prayers of imploring passion which filled his heart to overflowing in that moment.

As he ceased the girl's face was white and drawn, as if with inward pain, and her hands were locked tightly together, while the misery in her eyes was beyond all words.

"Vivienne!" he cried, puzzled and distressed by her evident suffering, "is anything the matter with you? My darling, speak to me. Your troubles are mine you know—do you not?"

"It is nothing," she said hurriedly; "only—why did you play that? Why did you bring back so vividly again all I was then—all I am now?"

"Why, Vivienne," he said, in astonishment, "what do you mean? Are you not happier now, dear? are you not in a sphere of life more suitable in every way—or," his voice trembled a little as he saw how the girl shrank from him, "or has any one offended you—pained you? You do not look like your fair bright self to-day!"

"Oh, Albert," she cried impetuously, "I am wretched here! I want to go away from it all. I want to be independent of every one. I cannot live in this humiliation any longer. I cannot bear the whispers and wonders as to who I am. Oh, help me to act for myself; to do something which will at least give me independence. I cannot—will not live at Renonçeux any longer."

"Vivienne," said the young man sadly, "this is a strange and sudden determination on your part. This home is as much yours as mine. The Countess de Verdreuil told me that she gave a solemn promise to your gran'mère to adopt and protect you, and you have seemed happy and contented all this time. Has any one said anything to make you feel your position?"

"Oh, no; but I can see it in their faces. I can read it in their looks. I know that I have no right to be with them as an equal until my birth is proved satisfactorily, and there is so much mystery about it all that I fear it is now impossible to ascertain anything."

"Vivienne," said Albert, in a low, passionate voice, "my darling, I must speak at last. Vivienne, give me the right to protect you. No whisper shall ever be breathed against you

then. I have dreamt and thought of you since first I saw you standing there, where you now stand, my beautiful queen. I have dreamed that one day I might stand before you and tell you how deathless and true a love is mine, how little it asks from you, except to make you happy evermore—if you will let me do it, Vivienne. For you I will win fame and honour and success—for you I can work and toil unceasingly. See already how much I have done; but it is nothing—nothing to what I will do for one little word of hope from you, my darling—for one whisper of encouragement to tell me it is not quite in vain.

“Oh, hush, Albert!” cried the girl, her white face upraised now, and her lips quivering with the pain his words had given her. “I never thought of this, of your caring for me in this way. I have looked upon you as a brother always, and, oh, forgive me, Albert, if it pains you to hear it, as it grieves me to say it, I can never look upon you as anything else. Oh, God forgive me!” she cried, turning away from the agony she saw in his face. “What have I done that *this* should come upon me too?”

A silence as of death fell between them, broken only by her stifled sobs as she leant against the window with her face buried in her hands. It seemed to Albert then as if all the light and beauty of the day had vanished, and he was standing in the deep, black darkness of an endless night, fighting with a foe whose deadly grip would never leave his heart—could never be shaken off from his life in any time to come. Across the blind despair and death-like agony of that moment, no ray of hope could shine. He was powerless to speak; into what words could he pour the anguish he was suffering?

“If my life could end *now*!” he said, at last, his voice falling on the stillness with a ring of passionate pain that went to Vivienne’s heart. “To have thought and hoped this so long, so long! And now—my God, how can I bear it!”

She raised her face to his appealingly.

“If anything I could do or say would make it less hard, how gladly I would do it! But, Albert, what you have asked is impossible. It could never be! Oh, why can you not be content as we were, Albert? Why give me this pain of paining you? Why not let me be your sister still as I have long been? Why—”

“Hush! can you ask such vain questions as these? It shows how little you know of a man’s love, or you would know also that having once given it he can no more calm it down to the mere placid ordinary friendship you name, than he can tear the heart that bears it out from his breast, and so learn forgetfulness and death.”

She trembled at the wild words, all the more pained and

terrified because they came from one ordinarily so gentle and so tender. What could she say to comfort him? Nothing she knew. Love like this she had never dreamed he would feel for her. Love like this it was not in her to feel *for him*. She knew her own heart now, and she knew to whom all its love was irrevocably given, and knowing something of his suffering by her own, she yearned to comfort him, yet could not.

The gentle pity in her soft eyes only made him feel more utterly wretched, only told him how vain was the hope that anything he could do would ever make them glow with passion, or kindle with answering tenderness. His face was white as death, and its anguish grew unbearable to Vivienne as she met his gaze fastened so imploringly on her; she was still standing before him, still wrapped and folded in the glow of the rich soft light. How fair, how inexpressibly fair, and yet how pitiless she seemed to him!

"There is no hope for me, then?" he said, jerking out the words as if each one hurt him even to speak it. "Oh, Vivienne! why?—surely love like mine must win some return at last, if you will only let me try, if you will only give me the same chance you give to the other men who crowd about you from day to day; if—" then he broke suddenly off and seized her hands and held them in his own, which burned like fire, "Say, Vivienne, is there one among *them* who has won what I covet; is there one you love? In pity tell me, and I will go from hence and never look upon your face again till I have learnt self-control or forgetfulness!"

She drew herself up with the old proud disdainful grace he remembered so well.

"One of *them*! those butterflies who hover round me and weary me with meaningless flattery! No! How can you think it? I should not be worthy of your love could I give mine so lightly and unworthily."

"Then—then, Vivienne, will you not give me some hope! something to look forward to in the future, when you will see how worthily I love, how deathlessly and enduringly I will remember you?"

"It would be but needless pain, I know," said the girl, with sad earnestness. "Do not ask me, Albert; indeed, indeed, a sister's love is all I can ever feel for you. It is best you school yourself to believe it now, however hard or cruel I may seem to you. It grieves me—how much it grieves me you can never know—to seem unkind to you; for ever since I came to Renonçeux you have been so kind, so gentle, so sympathizing; but yet what can I do?"

Her voice grew broken and uncertain as she read how her words

pained him, as she saw the heavy shadows, more pitiful than any tears, gather in his eyes.

"You can do nothing, of course," he said, with such utter desolation in his voice that it thrilled her heart with pain. "I have only been a fool, like most men at some period or other of their lives. I must bear my sorrow, as they have done before me ; go back to a lonely life, or strive to stifle the memory of my misery in the world I have so long shunned. What does it matter to any one what becomes of me ?"

"Don't speak so bitterly," she said ;—"there are many to care for you. Even though I cannot give you the love you wish, I shall always think of you as my truest, dearest friend ; the first I found out of my own poor home ; the one I shall keep all my life through, I hope."

She strove to speak cheerfully and bravely, though her heart was heavy within her ; for she loved Albert very dearly and truly ; he had been, as she said, her earliest friend in this new home ; but she knew only too well that the love she felt for him was too calm and sisterly to offer in exchange for the passionate worship of his whole heart ; that her love was all "save that of man or woman when they love their best," while his was the one best gift of his life, and in its fervour and intensity must be cast back to him by her own hands, even in the moment of its first utterance.

"There is a proverb about a starving man and half a loaf, is there not ?" he said, with a sad bitter laugh. "Even your friendship seems sweeter than any other love, Vivienne : but to see you, meet you, be with you, as I have been of late, I cannot bear any longer. I must do something to stifle this pain at heart—this madness that tortures me so vainly ; for, till I lose all power of loving, Vivienne, I know I shall love you, be it ever so vain or ever so hopeless. Perhaps, when the first sharpness and bitterness of my disappointment has worn off, I may be able to accept the friendship you offer ; now I *cannot* !"

The tears gathered in her eyes as she gazed at the white young face, so pitiful, yet so brave in the struggle for calmness, in the strong endeavour to subdue its signs of suffering before her at this moment. Softly and tenderly she spoke to him, all earnest, hopeful words her heart could prompt.

"You are too young to make one disappointment, however great it seems now, shadow all your life henceforward," she said at last. "Be brave, Albert, and do your best to conquer it. I scarcely think any woman is worth such a waste of love as a lifetime spent in her worship seems to me. There is so much to be done in the world, so much for us all to do, that to despair at the very commencement, because something has not happened just

as we wished it to happen, is neither right nor wise. Tell me you will try your best, dear Albert, to—to forget this. You are meant for great things, I know ; you must not let the world be ignorant of your merits any longer, and Art will be your best consoler yet.

The death-knell of every hope he had so long built, of every thought he had so long cherished, rang out in her firm and gentle words. She could never love him—never ! And he ? Ah ! every heart-beat told him, with swift and terrible agony, that his love could never die ; that its passion could never perish, do what he would, strive how he might.

He turned to her, and all the anguish, and all the love of his whole nature spoke out in wild, impassioned words.

“ My beautiful—my beloved, could any power living or dead make me forget you ? Oh, Vivienne, almost I could pray that we had never met ! and yet—not knowing you—my life would have lost the sweetest joy it has ever known—it ever *can* know—now.”

She bent her head to hide the falling tears that nothing could restrain. She would have made any sacrifice to give him peace again, and yet she felt how utterly powerless she was to whisper any comfort.”

“ Say good-bye to me,” he whispered, in a low, hoarse voice. “ Say good-bye, and let me leave you, and strive for calmness. I shall forget my manhood if I linger here, and shame even your weakness by my own.”

She looked up—her eyes all dark and misty with tears, and yet so pitiful in their wordless sympathy.

With a swift, passionate impulse, a yearning he could not repress, he suddenly drew her to his breast, and held her there, strained close to his beating, aching heart. The hot blood dyed her cheeks with swift and painful blushes, but looking at the agony of the white boyish face, she had not the power to resist him.

“ The first and the last,” he murmured passionately, as he bent his lips to hers, and let them rest there in one long, quivering kiss that was in itself as a farewell to the love that must henceforth be dead to him. “ Oh, my beautiful, my beloved, say one last word to me—one that in all the years to come may soothe the anguish of an hour like this !”

“ God comfort you,” she whispered softly, “ and send you the peace and rest of a purer love than any earth can give. And now say you can forgive me for this pain. If you could see my heart, you would know how deep is my remorse for having so unwittingly caused it.”

“ Forgive you ?” he said ; “ I would forgive you every sin,

every error. Darling, the world holds none whose love for you will be more tender, more true than mine. The fault is none of yours that I suffer now. Rather it is my own blind folly. I might have known—ah, long ago, I might have known how vain it was to hope this. And now, farewell!”

Not trusting himself to say another word, to give another look, he slowly loosed his hold and set her free, then turned and went swiftly away ere she could stay him.

She stood quite motionless where he had left her, with a nameless sense of fear and pain confusing her as she tried to think over all that had passed. Was she to blame? Had she crushed the brightness out of this young life? Had she destroyed the genius and the hopes within it?

“Oh, God, teach him to forget!” she prayed, as the agony of remorse, the tenderness of an infinite pity swept through her heart; then, pressing her hands to her burning temples, as if to still the pain throbbing within, she bowed her head on her outstretched arms and wept such tears as in all her life before she had never shed.

CHAPTER VI.

NEAR THE BRINK.

“My shadow falls upon my grave,
So near the brink I stand.”

Hood.

THE soft fair days of summer had passed away.

The shadows grew more sombre in the woods. The dead gold and crimson glory of falling leaves strewed the ground, and the glow of burning sunsets tinged the skies. On the orchard-mosses the over-ripened fruit dropped softly and unheeded from the boughs; the scent of grapes gathered for the wine-press, and the luscious dreamy odours of crushed leaves and fading flowers and trodden fruits, were heavy in the air.

It was the autumn time once more, and the changes in the world without were not greater than the changes in the world within. The little world of thought and life and human

passions which seems so all-important, which plays so great a part in the souls, the lives, the interests of men.

Over the Château of Renonçeux brooded the shadow of death. There was gloom and sorrow and trouble; darkened rooms and hushed footsteps and voices awed and subdued, for with the waning glory of the dying year the life of the Count de Verdreuil was waning too; fading slowly—surely—till it bore no likeness to the strength of manhood, till it was nothing but the lassitude of utter weakness, the helplessness of a little child.

There were no guests at Renonçeux now; none but Vivienne and Blanche; for even Albert Hoffmann had left—to study for his profession in Germany, he said; but there was one who knew of another reason for this sudden resolve, another cause for this strange absence, and though it grieved and pained her to think of his self-enforced banishment, she yet knew that his truest comfort and surest consolation lay in his art, and that to devote himself solely and entirely to that, would be the best if not the only remedy for a misplaced and unrequited love.

Of Raoul, no word had reached them since he left Renonçeux so abruptly. Neither letter nor message had he sent to any at the château. Vivienne was in complete ignorance as to his present address, and Blanche declined taking any steps to discover it, although every day it was feared that his father might die, and the young count's absence at such a time was strange and inexplicable to many.

But Blanche de Verdreuil had her own schemes—her own plans, and Raoul's presence at this time was scarce desirable. The quarrel between his father and himself was well known to her, and her words had fanned the old man's jealous rage and fierce anger to an incessant and consuming fire within his heart, to one restless, ceaseless craving for revenge in his mind.

Yet still, as he lay dying now, a faint remorse came over him. Raoul was his only son, the last of his name and race. It went hard with him to believe him dishonoured—to proclaim him base. He strove blindly, yearningly, for some foot-hold for his shaken faith; his love pleaded for the only child that had been born to him by the wife for whom he had had such tender reverence, such loyal trust, though he had never given her the blind, passionate adoring worship which his heart had bestowed on the love of his later years. His trust had been blind, his faith limitless, and he believed in Blanche and worshipped her still; content even for her sake to doubt his son's honour, so she bade him do it, and repaid him with sorceress smiles and false kisses, and murmured love words.

But though he had wronged Raoul, though he had bidden him leave his roof and seek it no more while he lived, no thought of

further punishment, of deeper injustice had been in his mind. Raoul was still his son ; he held his name and honour in his keeping ; he was the last of his race, and, whatever his sins and thoughts, the old man never forgot that his titles and his wealth were due to him ; that he must reign at Renonçeux when death gave him the right to do so ; when the old king was deposed for the young monarch to succeed in his place ; and if the thought brought any bitterness with it, he yet never dreamt of robbing Raoul of his lawful heritage, of divesting him of his legal rights. He did not think of such revenge as this ; but *another did*.

In the mournful, shadowy hues of his chamber, the old man lay one night. Lights were darkened there, and footsteps hushed, and voices whispered low and soft that another morning's sun would never rise for him, another dawn never greet his eyes with the flush and warmth and colour of a new day. And he knew it.

He had no pain now to rack his frame, to torture his limbs ; a great weariness and a great calm were all he felt, and he knew the end was near.

In the darkness and the shadows of the autumn twilight, while the red gleam of the fire shone over the rich hues and luxurious appointments of his chamber, a woman came and stood beside his bed. The flush and splendour of her beauty dazzled him ; the soft caress of her lips, the subtle perfume of her hair stole over his senses with a dreamy delight that wrapped him in bliss even now, with the hand of death and the shadows of eternity so close to him. He had loved her so utterly, so blindly since first he met her in the splendour and brilliance of her beauty, but never had he loved her as now, when he knew his hours were numbered, that every moment as it passed made one less for his eyes to rest on, and his hand to touch, and his ears to hear, the face and the voice of his enchantress.

She stooped over him as he lay there sick unto death, and her voice was very low and sweet as she asked him if he still suffered, if he were not better this night ?

"Much better," he murmured, as his eyes dwelt upon her with the limitless adoration of his great love. "My dearest ! only to see your face is relief and forgetfulness of pain."

She smiled. This fond belief, this unalienable faith and devotion, were still sweet to her ; were proof and signal of her power, and valuable, inasmuch as they were of use for the furtherance of her schemes.

"You wear my favourite colours," he said, touching gently the delicate azure folds of her robe. "You are more beautiful than ever, Blanche. The years but make your loveliness more perfect, it seems to me."

She seated herself beside him, and signed his attendants to retire. Then she answered,—

"It is only for *you* I value it ; alas ! if I could but see you in health and strength once more."

"A vain wish, I fear ; one never likely to be realized now," he answered sadly and regretfully. "Ah, Blanche ! to leave you is worse pain than any death can bring."

"Oh, hush, hush !" she said, as she laid her lips on his hand to still their trembling. "It is not *that* yet."

"It grieves you to lose me, then ?" he said, with a sudden light in his eyes as they rested on her bent head, with its wealth of shining hair. "You love me still ?"

"Ah ! you know it so well," she said softly. "None can be to me what you have been. None ever were before."

He was silent for very joy ; those words brought to his heart a deep, exquisite sense of pleasure that stirred and moved him even in his extremity of weakness and of pain.

"How can I reward you ? how can I thank you ?" he said. "Words are weak to tell how much I have loved you since first your face dazzled me, since first your power taught me the one passion of my heart. And now, Blanche, one word. You know that rumours reached me of Raoul's devotion to you. You know, too, how long I doubted and strove to resist all suspicion of his perfidy until I could doubt no longer. Tell me again, was it not true that he loved you ?"

"It was."

He drew a deep breath ; a light of fierce and sudden wrath flashed in his eyes.

"And you ? I never asked you before, Blanche. Forgive me that I ask it now."

"I gave him the answer he deserved ; surely you know what *that* would be ?"

A spasm contracted his face, his colour changed, his breath caught. Then he asked her fiercely,—

"His words ! tell me quick ! Were they dishonour to *you* ? of myself I speak not."

She knew he was dying. She knew his hours were numbered, and yet she had no remorse, no pity. Low and clear and pitiless the words fell from her lips,—

"They were—the worst dishonour man can name to woman !"

An oath—deep muttered, fierce with a wrath that made her tremble, escaped his lips.

"If I could only avenge it, if life could be to him the shame and bitterness he would have made it to me !"

Her face flushed, her eyes glittered with a triumph cruel, base, and evil. The moment of her vengeance was at hand, the

hour she had schemed and planned for so long had come to her at last. She bent to him; a whisper, remorseless, vindictive as herself stole from her lips, and the purpose of her life shaped itself out in those brief words,—

"*You can avenge it.* It is not yet too late. The shame he would have brought on you, you can repay to the uttermost. The dishonour he would have given to your heart, your house, your name, you can give back to him in full and ample measure!"

The old man listened to her breathless and confused.

"What do you mean?" he said hoarsely. "Speak—"

She bent still lower, so that no ear but his own could catch the words.

"Renonçez is not entailed. You need not leave it to an *unworthy son!*"

He started up. His face white and ghastly, his eyes blazing with fierce and jealous passions. He looked like an avenger of evil in that moment of fury and of shame. He suffered fiercer agony in the temptation those words brought to him, than any physical suffering had given to his wasted frame.

"The last of my race, the last of my name," he muttered, so low she could scarcely hear him. "To crown him with such dishonour as this! To cast him out on the world with the ban of disinheritance clinging to him evermore. It were punishment enough for heaven a worse crime."

"And does he not merit it?" she asked, rising to her feet, and confronting him with passionate fury. "Is my honour nothing? Am I to be dethroned that he may reign here? Is his sin to be never visited upon his head because it failed in accomplishing what he desired? Oh, Heavens! and I believed you loved me!"

He sank back on the pillows, trembling like a leaf, a thousand emotions warring in his heart and torturing his brain. He could not reason, he could not think; he could only hear the voice of passion, of outraged honour, of fierce and jealous wrath. He was silent. Save for his laboured breathing she might have thought him dead; alarmed and terrified, she hastened to a cabinet near by, and poured out a glass of wine, which she brought him.

"Drink this," she whispered softly, "it will give you strength and calmness. It will bring you power to avenge wrong, and shield your honour?"

Unhesitatingly he obeyed. The rich draught brought the colour to his face, the warmth to his chill limbs and trembling hands.

"I am better," he said, as he gave her back the glass. "I can

think now. Tell me, Blanche, is it too late? Is there any one here who can draw up a fresh will for me?"

She trembled with delight. The fierce, cruel joy in her eyes deepened and sparkled with success, so near and sure it seemed to her now.

"The notary is here," she said softly, "shall he come to you?"

"Yes, quick, or it may be too late; and stay, Blanche; let the physician be present too, that he may certify I am still sane, and capable of accounting for my actions."

She summoned the attendants and gave the message. The old man expressed no wonder, no surprise at the fact of the notary being there ready for the summons. His mind was full of this one idea, to avenge on his son the dishonour he would have brought on him: he could grasp no other.

"He thought me an old dotard," he muttered fiercely to himself, "he looked on that beauty and coveted it for himself. He would have sinned against me without regret. He shall find even with my last breath I can defend my honours and hers. When he comes here once more to claim his heritage, to reign in his own right, he will find that a father's justice can outweigh a father's love. All other sins, all sins to me even, I could have forgiven, but the sin that touches *her* shall never win from me forgiveness or excuse. The last of my race, the last of my name!" he cried aloud, with a sudden passionate grief that thrilled through the silence around. "Oh, God, how hard it is to do this thing!"

The guilty woman beside him heard that cry. She turned to him again.

"Better let the race die and the name perish while yet it is borne by a life pure and noble and stainless as yours, than be perpetuated by one shameless and unworthy."

"You are right," he said simply; "those words are more noble than my regrets. To you shall the name go and my possessions with it, and if, in years to come—" his voice trembled and shook with the effort to say the words—"if in years to come *you* wed another, let your children bear it in place of him who is my son on longer."

She bent her head to hide the flush that burned on her cheeks.

"Ever noble, ever true!" she murmured, as she kissed his brow, already damp with the chill of death. "How can I thank you, save by being as true and tender of your memory as you have been of my honour."

His eyes filled with a great agony—these moments were torture to him. He hated himself for what he was about to do, and yet his blind belief and passionate adoration for this woman

left him powerless to refuse her will. She had ruled and swayed him so long, that in his helplessness and weakness he was completely at her mercy. He never even questioned why she had kept these things from him till his fate was sealed and his life all but ended, till weakness and suffering had enfeebled his frame and robbed him of his clear intellect and calm reason. He had spent his heart, his honour, his very existence on her, and now she could do with him as she would. He believed her words as though an angel had spoken them ; he believed in Raoul's guilt as firmly as if his own lips had confessed it, and rage and passion, outraged honour, and blind, besotted love, all conspired to give him over to the power of a vengeful and unjust temptation.

A sin against himself he could have pardoned, but a sin against *her* seemed to him a crime too base for any forgiveness to reach it. So he lay there, stern, pitiless, silent, while the minutes ticked away the passage of time and brought him nearer and nearer to the shadow-land of death.

There came a slight stir in the silence. The notary entered, and with him the physician who had never left the château for days past. They raised the old man on his pillows, but a strange, feverish strength seemed to have come to him, and he waved back all assistance. Then, with a clear, calm, unfaltering voice he dictated to the notary beside him the words of his last will and testament. The physician, the countess, and the attendants withdrew to the farther end of the room just out of ear-shot. To the doctor it seemed no unusual thing that his patient should alter his will at the last moment. Many did it. Why not the Count de Verdreuil ?

"I telegraphed to the embassy yesterday, and desired them to let the young count know of his father's danger," he said softly to Blanche ; "you said he had left no address here, but he will be sure to get a telegram now, I should imagine. It was the best plan I could think of."

"You did quite right," she answered absently, her ears strained to catch the sound of her husband's voice.

Would that slow, monotonous dictation never be over ? Every moment seemed an eternity of suspense to her. The will once signed and sealed, she had nothing to fear. Raoul might come to-night if he chose, she thought triumphantly. He could do nothing ; she was safe, and her vengeance, long promised, was at last secured.

The voice ceased, the witnesses were summoned, the signatures affixed. The notary folded up his documents and left the room. The physician stood by his patient's side and laid his finger on the pulse ; each beat grew slower feebler, more uncertain. He

laid him gently back on the pillows, but the dim eyes still turned in blind, beseeching agony to the face of the woman he loved. She approached him, her cheeks ashy pale, her lips colourless almost as his own. With a last effort he stretched his arms to her, his voice murmured her name, his eyes still sought her own. Then suddenly strength seemed to forsake him, and with a faint sigh, as of utter weariness, he fell back—dead !

Then the guilty woman who had deceived him, whose words had stung him to a cruel and remorseless vengeance, for the first time in all her life felt a woman's weakness overpower her. Her brain reeled, a sickness of mortal dread came over her, a mist blinded her eyes and shut out the lights and the faces around.

With a low, faint cry of terror, Blanche de Verdreuil fell faint and senseless to the ground.

CHAPTER VII.

A GREAT SIN.

It is great sin to swear unto a sin,
But greater still to swear a sinful oath."

Shakespeare.

In the hush and silence of the late night, Blanche de Verdreuil sat alone—a look of cruel meaning in her eyes, all the clear, sweet radiance, the delicate loveliness of her face changed to the pallor of exhaustion and fatigue. She felt neither remorse nor regret in this hour, her vengeance was still sweet to her heart, and she never wearied of dwelling on it. But, despite herself, a shapeless, nameless fear was chilling her, a fear of the very man she had wronged, and with that fear of him the dread of her own sins, the memories of past years.

The wind sighed wearily through the trees without. Each blast that shook the boughs, each moan whose plaintive murmurs echoed ever and again through the stillness, startled her and chilled her blood with a new terror—the terror of guilt, the blackness of treachery and falsehood. How it haunted her, and yet how she gloried in her success ; how even her fear could not rob it of its triumph, the honey-sweetness of its poison lying deep down in the very depths of her heart.

Would Raoul suspect her ? she wondered. He had not done

so before. The quarrel with his father had been entirely between themselves. Neither had implicated nor suspected her as the origin and cause of it ; but now if Raoul should return, if he heard this will read, if the news for which he was so totally unprepared came to him with all the publicity and shame she meditated, what would be the result. If he traced the evil to her, if he believed she had planned and furthered it with all her influence and all her power—what then ? Ah !—what then ?

Through the years that had passed no whisper had been breathed ; and yet she knew her secret was never safe—that it might rise and crush her at any moment ; and if she made this man her enemy, he would be a dangerous and relentless one. Vague shapes, nameless horrors, overtook and coloured her fancy as she pictured to herself what he might do had he the power. How the fierce and terrible passions of his race, once loosed from their long restraint, might rise up and avenge the wrong she had dealt, the shame she had given.

The red glow of the fire burnt lower and lower, yet she sat there, unheeding the passage of the hours, the flight of time. The gloom of the night enclosed her ; the weary sighing of the wind ceased to trouble her. The stars faded and the dawn came, grey and chill, and colourless as her own face, with the weight of its weary passions and its restless thoughts. But when the morning broke she still sat there beside the white fallen ashes of the fire ; the red flush in the east woke the birds to sing at her window-panes as they left their ivy nests, yet never woke her from that trance and stupor of something worse than grief, more terrible than woe.

For though Blanche de Verdreuil had vowed herself to evil, though she had neither remorse, nor grief, nor pity for those she wronged, for herself she yet had *fear*—fear of the dead sins of other years, as they broke from their graves and faced her in the solitude of the autumn night, while the man who had loved her all too well lay cold and dead, beyond all power to recall his last rash act, and the man she had wronged was speeding swiftly, hastily back to the home he would only reach—too late !

The news of the old count's death spread far and wide. It came to Raoul in Rome ; it reached Albert Hoffmann in the quiet little German town where he was studying ; it travelled to Paris, where the great world received it with little wonder and less regret, while men spoke together of the vast possessions he would leave behind him, and wondered how much of his wealth would fall to the share of his beautiful wife, and laid wagers as to how soon she would marry again.

Travelling night and day, allowing himself no pause, no rest, to sleep, Raoul hastened back to Renonçeux. His mind was full

of but one thought—to be in time ; to hear the voice whose last utterance had been anger, speak his forgiveness ; to see the aged eyes whose last look had been wrath and scorn of him, soften to the old love, the old faith they had once held. His father was dying, he knew. Ah ! surely Death would spare him just long enough for his son to see him once more ; surely that terrible yearning which hungered for one glance, one word of forgiveness, would not feel its longings disappointed ! Surely he would be in time ! He prayed it as he had never prayed for anything before. It fevered and consumed him with its intense and fearful agony. The swiftest speed at which he travelled seemed all too slow ; for his thoughts were ever with the dying man whose hours were numbered, for whom he had now no memories save gentle and forgiving ones, even though he had wronged and suspected him so basely. How swiftly the time sped ! how slowly his journey progressed ! how to the fever and agony of his thoughts as they spanned the distance which separated him from that dying-bed, all motion seemed slow and lagging.

Would he never reach Renonçeux ? Would he never be in time ?

* * * *

At last the grey towers rose before him ; the old familiar landscapes met his eyes. The foaming horses bore him swiftly up the beautiful avenue, now carpeted with dead and fallen leaves.

How dark, and mournful, and deserted it all looked ! Darkened windows, through which no ray of light gleamed ; the mournful sighing of the wind the only sound throughout that hushed and solemn stillness. He sank back on the cushions of his travelling carriage, and covered his face with his hands. On Nature itself seemed stamped the fear that had tortured him so long ; on the face of the earth, the gloom of the sky, he seemed to read those words, "Too late !"

"Am I in time ?"

His haggard face, his hoarse, broken voice, spoke such suffering and suspense, that the old steward who awaited him felt his eyes grow dim and his own voice tremble as he answered,—

"No, Monsieur le Comte ; I grieve to tell you it is too late. The funeral takes place to-morrow."

Raoul staggered against the doorway with the reeling, helpless step of a drunken man.

"*And we parted in anger !*"—that was the thought which tortured him. He could never hear the words "I forgive" spoken ; he could never read the restored faith, the old, tender love, in his father's eyes.

"Take me to him," he said abruptly ; and the old man bowed low, and led the way to the darkened room where that white, still form was lying ; silent for evermore, wrapped in that last sleep which knows no earthly waking.

Raoul stooped over it. How calm and still and passionless was the aged face ! How strangely peaceful and content ; no trace of its last fierce anger, no regret for that last rash deed disturbed its tranquil rest or shadowed its deep repose. Unconscious of the wrong done to him, the shame in store for him, the son bent over his dead father's bier, and on the marble brow a hot tear dropped, wrung from his agony and despair. The calm, proud eyes which had known no tears since infancy, grew blind and misty with those that gathered in them now. A deep, voiceless sob shook him as he threw himself down by that narrow couch from which the sleeper would never arise to speak the words he had so longed to hear.

Respectful of that grief, the old servitor left him alone with the dead, softly closing the door that the sound might not disturb him ; and Raoul de Verdreuil knelt there in the silence and the gloom of the night, his strong frame rent and shaken by a storm of emotion, a tempest of grief such as had never yet visited his heart ; one prayer alone thrilling through the remorse and tenderness of his great love,—

"Oh, God ! forgive me that I ever thought a harsh or angry thought of *him*. Now at least he knows my innocence ; now at least he can bestow his pardon !"

Ah ! do the dead ever know again the thoughts of the living ? If so, how can they rest so peaceful and content while those they have loved and left are suffering by their acts—acts which they cannot recall when the world and the things of the world are left behind them ! Do they know remorse, or repentance, or regret in that unknown land whither they have gone ? Do they see with clearer vision, judge with calmer powers ? If so, what peace, or rest, or happiness can they know while the wrong and injustice they have dealt to others still haunt their memories, still disturb their peace ?

With all honour and respect the Count de Verdreuil was buried. With all sorrow and regret the mourners followed the stately cortège, and then back to the château, where the light of day was once more admitted, where, the voices no longer sank to dim, mysterious whispers, and the footsteps were no longer hushed as if their sound could wake the dead or penetrate the awful peace and calm which shrouded him, they came for the last ceremony of all, "the reading of the will."

The Countess de Verdreuil, in her heavy mourning, which seemed to make her complexion more delicately fair even

than its wont, reclined languidly amidst her cushions. Vivienne St. Maurice, pale and awe-struck, and with her lovely eyes so full of sympathy that Raoul could not but read it, was beside her. The invited guests took their seats around, and then the notary produced his documents, and with much rustling of papers and settling of gold eye-glass, and almost nervous fussiness, he began to read. A dead silence fell on all. The words were few and clear, and pitilessly distinct. On Raoul's ear they fell at first with a bewildering and wholly incomprehensible meaning. *What was this?*

For a moment his face turned white as death, and his hands clenched convulsively at the nearest support; he fancied he must be the victim of some fearful nightmare, the prey of some delirious fancy. Had he assembled all these people to witness his shame; to hear his dishonour; to be the subject of their compassion and amusement? Was this *truth* that reached him?

The whole room, the crowd of amazed and wondering faces surged round him like a sea. Then the whole truth seemed to stand out clear and distinct before him; burning into his brain its fiery letters, every one of which was a shame and an injustice, throbbing and beating in his heart till every pulse seemed sounding the misery and the horror of this knowledge which had come to him from a stranger's lips; which had found him so totally unprepared.

As it all came home to him at last, as he heard that he was now a disinherited son as well as an unloved one; as in the long list of a stainless ancestry *his* name stood out banned and disgraced for no fault, no crime, no dishonour of his own; he felt a wild torrent of fury, of passionate indignation swelling up within him. Wounded pride and unmerited wrong unloosed all the fierce and long restrained passions of his race, and Raoul de Verdreuil sprang from his seat, and with one stride crossed the room, and stood beside the notary.

"What are you reading?" he demanded.

Blanche de Verdreuil shivered with a cold, sudden fear.

Gazing half-terrified at the face before her, she felt, for the first time, what she had risked in unloosing the fierce and terrible passions of this man. In making him her enemy she was risking all peace, all security henceforward. In the awful stillness of that moment, while his eyes rested on the paper which the notary handed him, while a faint murmur of astonishment ran through the listeners watching him, the chill of fear swept through her heart, and her face turned white as death.

Slowly Raoul de Verdreuil read the words. Silently he laid the paper down before the notary, and then—while all watched,

while all waited, half in pity, half in amazement—his eyes turned and rested on the white face of the woman who had wronged him.

She could not avoid that look, some strange overmastering force compelled her to meet it, and all the defiance and pride of her nature died out in her eyes as she raised them to his, and in their place gleamed a swift and sudden fear, a fear that all read, and many wondered at. She cowered like a guilty thing before that look from the man she had wronged, and from her lips fell a faint cry of terror.

As Raoul heard it a smile crossed his own, so pitiless, so chill, that none seeing it could repress a fear of what it boded for the future. Half unconsciously his hand closed on the paper, crushing it like a thread in his grasp.

"Did you draw *this* up?" he asked the notary.

"I did."

"And was—my father" (how the firm voice shook [now]) "perfectly sane at the moment he dictated it?"

"Perfectly; his brain was as clear, his faculties as bright as ever. The physician can testify to it."

"Then," and Raoul's hand relaxed its grasp of the paper, and he turned to the countess, "then, madame, allow me to congratulate you on your success. You have a creed of honour all your own I know, a convenient creed, and one that has served you well. But take care that some day I too may not have it in my power to deal you just such mercy as you have dealt to me."

The delicate face before him paled to the death-like hue of intense terror. In the hour of that triumph she had coveted so long, Blanche de Verdreuil felt the guilty fear of retributive justice, the serpent sting of remorse robbing her of all peace or joy for evermore. She sank back amidst the soft cushions of her couch, while a deadly faintness stole over her, and her eyes gazed with faint, appealing terror on Raoul's face, so calm, so merciless *then*.

In that moment she wondered how she had ever loved him, and yet her baseness looked shameful before that cold contempt, that grand and pitiless scorn, in the face of her enemy. She knew how mean and cowardly and degraded she must appear, and the knowledge killed all love for him for evermore; for passion wild, undisciplined, and unrestrained, ever trenches on the borderland of hate, and Blanche had reached that borderland now. Raoul, seeing the terrified, guilty look in her eyes, remembered she was a *woman*. A thing too mean, too contemptible for even just anger, or reproach.

Though the blood of his race ran fierce and hot with its untamable passions through his veins, though wrath and fury, and the bitterness of unmerited shame surged wildly in his

heart, he yet restrained himself. He would not let others smile contemptuously at his inability to compose himself, to refrain from upbraiding the future mistress of his house, and possessor of his wealth. With a great and supreme effort he turned to those assembled.

"Messieurs, pardon me that in a moment of just indignation I have seemed discourteous. The totally unexpected news I have heard this morning must plead my excuse. There can be no further need for my presence, so I will relieve you of it ; you may, perhaps, be able to judge what pain it is to remain here !"

With a grave, courteous bow, he turned away and passed from the room ; those near the window saw him cross the terrace, and take his way through the leaf-strewn avenue which led to the chief entrance of the park. He walked at his usual leisurely pace ; a stranger meeting him would have deemed nothing unusual had happened—only in his eyes, glowing under their drooped lids with fierce resolve and bitter humiliation, could the passions that raged within his heart be read.

It was just mid-day, the sun was hot with the heat of the scarce departed summer ; the leaves fell slow and soft from the boughs ; here and there a bird's song rose on the stillness, and the cloudless heavens were calm and serene as he glanced up through the arching trees above his head, and caught the blue lustre of their tranquil beauty. Alas ! that nature should be so fair, and only man so vile !

The day was without shadow, the hour without cloud in its noontide brightness ; but Raoul hated its beauty, hated its peace, which only seemed to mock the raging passions of his heart. He walked onward, feeling that the bitterness of unmerited shame was, for the first time in all his life, his portion ; that he, the last of his race, was driven from his birthplace, banned and dishonoured for no sin, by a woman's treachery, a dying man's credulous fondness. Through those silent solitudes of woodland, those aisles of stately trees, he pursued his way, the thoughts within his breast speeding him on, he cared not whither ; the sense of unmerited wrong maddening him to fury.

Suddenly he paused and turned. From the rising ground on which he stood the lofty towers and stately terraces of the château were plainly visible. A host of powerful memories thronged in his heart as he gazed. It was the home of his childhood ; the beloved birthplace he had so revered. From scenes of hardship, of travel, of danger, he had ever come to that home as a refuge and a shelter ; and now—now it was nothing to him, now it had been wrested from his hands and given to another. It had been stained and polluted by treachery and deceit.

Perhaps—oh, bitterest thought of all!—his feet would never again cross its threshold, would never tread its familiar ways. As this thought crossed him and came home with swift and sudden pain to his heart, a half-stifled cry of inward agony escaped him. It pierced the silence of the woodland, it startled the singing birds in their boughs above, then, throwing up his arms above his head, Raoul de Verdreuil fell face downwards on the mossy, leaf-strewn earth, like a man senseless and dead.

CHAPTER VIII.

WHEN JOY IS FLED.

“As the earth when leaves are dead,
As the night when sleep is sped,
So the heart when joy is fled.”

Shelley.

How long Raoul lay in that death-like stupor he never knew. When he awoke to consciousness again, with a faint, quivering breath as of some inward pain, he found that he was resting in Albert Hoffmann's arms; and starting up, amazed and confused with this new-felt weakness still numbing his senses and bewildering his brain, he exclaimed,—

“*You*, Albert? Why did you follow me here?”

The loving eyes warmed and kindled with new, rich light.

“Why! Did you dream that in your trouble and your need I should be long absent? Did you deem mine only a summer-day friendship, Raoul?”

His friend was silent. He staggered to his feet, ashamed of the womanish weakness that had overtaken him, ashamed that the pride and the strength within had given way so utterly at last; vexed that any human eye, even that of the friend he loved so well, should have witnessed his helplessness, as he lay faint and unconscious, smitten to the very dust by the heavy blow of a great and unexpected calamity such as had overtaken him.

He was silent for some minutes, while he leant weak and exhausted against the trunk of the great chestnut beneath which he had fallen. Then, meeting the pitying love of his friend's eyes, he broke the silence and said,—

"Albert, can you account for this—this injustice to me? Had any sign or word of it been given by my father ere he died?"

"You know I was away, Raoul," he answered; "I only came back late last night—after your own return in fact—and when I saw you this morning I did not like to intrude upon your grief. The news that will contained was as strange, as unexpected to me as to yourself."

"But how was it you were away?" asked Raoul, in surprise.

"Did you not hear? did you not know I have been in Freiburg for the last three months?" said Albert, his face paling a little as he met Raoul's calm, astonished gaze.

"This is the first I have heard of it," he answered. "What took you there?"

"I am going to study my art in real earnest," said the young man, avoiding that searching gaze bent on him now; "I have only been playing at it hitherto. I saw an advertisement in a German paper from one Professor Eltermein, a celebrated musician and a careful teacher. He wanted a pupil to board and reside with him, and take some of the duties of *concert-meister* off his hands. I answered it, and then, everything being satisfactorily and speedily arranged, I took up my abode with him; and only when Vivienne wrote to tell me of the Count de Verdreuil's extreme danger did I return."

A sudden spasm of pain crossed Raoul's face. Vivienne—he had lost her too! He had given his love in vain; he had spent his heart in a fruitless, passionate worship, hopeless as it was sweet. Of course Albert was working for her, studying his art, pursuing fame and achieving success for her sake alone, for the great gift and precious guerdon of her love. And he—he was so utterly destitute of all love now. His life henceforth would only be one of suffering and despair. He stifled the pain within by a strong effort. He knew none suspected his love for Vivienne; he was determined that Albert—least of all—should guess at its existence.

"You are wise, I think," he said simply; "a man's best safeguard lies in work. Were it not for that, I think I should go mad now."

"It is a cruel thing, a fearful thing!" said Albert indignantly. "Oh, Raoul, when I heard those words read, I thought I must be the victim of some dreadful nightmare, some evil dream. I could not believe that your father would ever have committed an act of such injustice, have dealt out to you a wrong so shameful and so strange."

"You do not think I merited it, then?" asked Raoul calmly,

though his eyes glowed and burnt with the fever and the pain of his heart.

"*I!* think you merited dishonour! The whole world could not force such belief on me."

The eager, boyish denial, the wondering amazement in the fair face beside him, soothed Raoul's heart as no other power could have soothed it then.

"Thank you!" he said very quietly, though his hand trembled as he laid it on the young man's shoulder. "Your simple trust is worth a hundred protestations. But you cannot suppose my father has acted thus for no cause, for no reason at all?"

"I know you have been wronged," was the indignant answer. "Ah, Raoul, I told you long ago I feared the influence of the Countess de Verdreuil. Of late she could do with your father as she would. Her power you can trace for yourself now, for you know how he loved his name, how he ever used to urge upon you the necessity for marriage. He could not bear the idea of his race dying out; and now, though you are the last Count de Verdreuil, though he knew he had no other heir, he yet could leave all his enormous wealth, his vast possessions, to his wife; and, worst of all, stipulate that if she marries again her children shall inherit the property, and take the name and titles that are justly yours. Oh, Raoul, why do you allow anything so unjust to stand? Why do you not dispute it to the uttermost? He could not have been reasonable or sane when he made such a will as that."

"You heard what they said—he was perfectly sane; it is certified by his physician, by all who witnessed the will; and that is enough for me. He did it in reason; and even if he had no *right* to do it, do you think that I would seek to wring from justice what was denied me by my father's love?"

"Ah, Raoul," said Albert sadly, "you are far too noble for the sins and falsehoods of such a world as this we live in. You have been wronged, cruelly wronged, I know; and those who have accused you of error profit by their falsehood, while you stand silent and unmoved, and see all you love go to strange names and alien blood. How can you bear it?"

"No words of yours can make it seem less hard to me," said Raoul, the hot blood dyeing his face as he thought of his unmerited dishonour, a thousand memories of past years, past hopes, and noble ambitions rising and breaking forth within his heart. "Do not think I am going to sit tamely by and let that false traitress profit by her deed. She will have cause to repent it one day, if I mistake not. And then——"

He paused; and Albert, as he watched the chill, relentless smile on his lips, felt that it boded little mercy to Blanche de

Verdreuil in the future, if ever her path crossed his ; if the tangled webs of her past life were ever unravelled by the hands of the man she had wronged ; if all the misery and the evil she had done to him, could ever *by him* be dealt back to her in full and ample measure.

In that moment Raoul de Verdreuil registered a vow, none the less sure because it was unspoken, that this shame, and agony, and bitterness, this only legacy of his father's love, should bring to the treacherous heart of the woman who had given it to him to bear, the just punishment that she deserved. Her ill-gotten wealth should bring her no joy ; her possessions should but burden her with remorse. That she was a *woman* he forgot ; that she was a vile and treacherous foe he alone remembered.

From the hour that Blanche de Verdreuil had wronged her husband's son, the sleuth-hounds of vengeance were loosed on her track, and with every day that dawned, every sun that set, the punishment of her sin was slowly and surely preparing to meet her. The past was already arming itself from its grave of dead and unforgotten memories to crush into dust the glories of the future she had promised herself ; and that past held a secret which could rob her youth of its beauty, her life of its sweetness, her soul of its peace.

"And what are you going to do now, Raoul ?" asked Albert, breaking the silence that had so long reigned between them.

"I shall go back to Rome," he answered. "I shall not care to set foot in my native land again, you may be sure, Albert. I must set myself to carve out my own fortunes now. You know hard work is the best exorcist for dark hours and painful memories. God knows I shall have enough of them ! and yet I cannot sit down and repine for all I have lost while I have life and strength and liberty left me. I suppose I must learn to do without happiness !"

He spoke so sadly that Albert's gentle heart was pained and grieved to hear him. Words like these were new and rare from Raoul's lips, so rare that they breathed out a pain he could not stifle, a suffering he could not conceal, and in Albert's eyes came a speechless longing to comfort him, that Raoul could not but read ; that touched his heart amidst all its bitterness and all its pain.

"Raoul," said the boy gently, "you remember when you left Renonçeux so suddenly a few months back, and how I prayed you then to let me know your trouble and share your secret, but you would not. Has that anything to do with what has happened ? Did you and your father part in anger ? I remember thinking how strange it was he never remarked your absence or mentioned your name, and from that day he never smiled or

seemed as he used to be. He changed and broke down, and grew so old and helpless that it seemed as if years had passed over his head since that night. And he used to rise at night and wander about the château like a ghost, and was always seen going to that little anteroom which leads from the reception-rooms,—you know it ; do you not ?—with the two entrances.”

“ Yes, yes,” said Raoul impatiently ; “ and he used to go there, you say ? ”

“ Oh, yes ; continually at night, and he would sit for hours there alone, with his head bowed on his arms, perfectly still, perfectly motionless. Every one noticed it at last, and Vivienne told me that it was only when he grew too weak and helpless to raise himself, or even move from his bed, that he discontinued this habit. Was it not strange ? ”

“ He must have felt some remorse, then,” said Raoul, speaking more to himself than to Albert. “ That room was where we parted. How little I thought when he refused my hand that his own would never touch mine in life again ! ”

“ Why was your parting such an unfriendly one ? ” asked Albert. “ Had *she* begun to work mischief even then ? ”

“ She has done nothing else since she married him,” said Raoul bitterly. “ Albert, that time you ask of is a bitter and remorseful memory to me. My father spoke to me that night such words as between man and man could only be avenged by blood : as coming from father to son, I could only refute by denial ; denial which was never credited. We parted in bitter anger, and he was unforgiving to the last. How merciless his wrath, how firm his faith in my guilt, this last act shows. I never believed he could be *vengeful*, but now I know it only too well ! ”

He turned aside, and gazed wearily and regretfully up the long avenue, away to where the lofty towers of the château were bathed in the warm glow of the autumn sunlight. He felt as if his home had never been so dear to him as now when he had lost it, and in his heart he almost cursed the woman who had come between him and his father’s love, and robbed him of his heritage.

Albert made no remark on his last words. He was in ignorance of the very reason of the quarrel between father and son, which had brought such results about, but he felt that no words, no sympathy could give Raoul any comfort now. His friend’s voice broke on the stillness, with a sudden, regretful cry, that showed how his whole nature was shaken by this new and unforeseen calamity.

“ To lose all that ! to lay it down and see another possess it, a new race dwelling where the old have dwelt so long ! Oh, God ! that I had died before this day ! ”

"Nay, Raoul, that is not like you to say such words. You know yourself stainless and honourable; you suffer for another's treachery, not for your own sin. That thought should surely give you strength now, and consolation in time to come. And there is yet hope, Raoul. Blanche may never marry, or, even if she does, may bear no heirs. In that case you will have your own again. She is just the woman to make no provision for the future, and unless she leaves a will, you will be able to claim it all back again. Perhaps some day I shall see you once more reigning at Renonçeux in your own right. You know treachery never yet succeeded in its aims; it is certain to overreach itself sooner or later."

Raoul shook his head, with a faint smile.

"You mean well, I know, Albert; but your consolations are useless at present. The smart is too recent for any hope of its healing just yet. My only comfort is in action now. I shall never set foot in the château again, unless—a most improbable occurrence—I can come there with my honour cleared, my rights restored. Until that day dawns I leave France. It has not a place or a memory that is not inexpressibly painful to me. I have won little love in my life, and there will be few to miss, and none to regret me here. Now, say farewell, and go back to the château. Stay, here is my address in Rome. You can write to me when you go back to Germany again, and I promise to let you know of my whereabouts. You are my only tie to life and love; I cannot afford to lose sight of you entirely."

Albert took the card from his hand silently and sadly. No parting between them had ever seemed so sad a one as this. A moment's silence reigned between them, as with clasped hands they stood, their eyes resting on each other's face, as if that long, wistful look was their last.

The words that passed their lips there were none to hear save the birds who had hushed their singing in the boughs above. The proud head of the young count bent low, his voice was stifled and hoarse as it fell on Albert's ears, his hands shook like a woman's.

"May God reward you for your faith and love. For your sake I will believe life still holds some good for me. Even if we never meet again, remember that in the darkest hour of my life your love was the one thing that kept my heart from despair."

His hands loosed their grasp, his footsteps echoed for one brief moment, as they crushed the fallen leaves beneath their tread; then, without one backward glance at the home he loved, or the friend he left, Raoul de Verdreuil went swiftly on through the winding avenue, which led to the lodge-gates beyond. Albert rested silent and motionless where he had left him—his

eyes blind to the light, his ears deaf to the sigh of the wind, to the twitter of the birds above him, and all the brief, sweet sunshine of the autumn day shut out by a mist of tears.

* * * *

Ere nightfall, the château was once more deserted, the guests had left.

The Countess de Verdreuil was now in undisturbed possession of the enormous wealth, the princely possessions for which she had bartered her beauty and her honour.

And with only a brief farewell to Vivienne, Albert Hoffmann went back to Freiberg again, never more to return to the home which he had shared with his friend since his early boyhood ; never more to see its familiar beauty, to tread its familiar ways.

For him, as for Raoul, a new life had begun, and the tranquil peace of the old was a thing of the past.



CHAPTER IX.

THE TRUTH AT LAST.

“ ‘ He loves thee not ! ’ thus spoke they to the maid,
‘ He sports with thee ; ’ she bow’d her head in grief.”

Geibel.

THAT night Vivienne St. Maurice sat alone by the bright fire in her room, thinking sadly and wearily of the events of the past day. To her, as to Albert, the news of Raoul’s disinheritance came with a startling and unexpected shock.

What was the reason of it ? That question neither could answer. In their brief interview, ere Albert left Renonçeux, the young man had only said that his friend declared his intention of never returning to France again unless this dishonour was effaced, this stain upon his name removed, and Vivienne heard the news with a strange sickness at heart, for since that memorable night when she had performed in Albert’s opera, Raoul had never by word or look resumed that cordial, and to her most precious friendship, which had been the sweetest and most absorbing joy her life had ever held.

How the bond had been severed so utterly she could not tell ; she could only, in her deep humility, imagine that he had wearied of his interest in her. What was there, she asked herself often and often, to attract and allure a man like Raoul de Verdreuil,

in her ignorance, her simplicity, her innocent, childish adoration of himself. He had been so much to her, her heart had unconsciously made him its hero, its ideal, long before she had ever seen him, and when she did meet him, the grave reverence, the perfect chivalry, the tender interest of his manner had won such trust, such faith, such tenderness from her that a love, deathless, exhaustless, unspeakable, was rooted in her heart too firmly ever to be ejected thence again. She did not know herself yet how deep it was, how pure and steadfast, and unchangeable. She knew little of the world: its follies had only amused her, its shams and trickeries only wearied her, and the innocence of her own nature had learnt no harm and caught no contagion from the evils it contained. She knew so little of life, of its depths of danger, its perils of passion, its sins of shame. The simple creeds of her own heart were her best safeguard, and all its highest, purest, yet most passionate devotion had been won, unknown to him, unconsciously to her, by Raoul de Verdreuil.

But now the longing to see his face and hear his voice had been answered by equal pain in his presence. She had seen him again, but his greeting had been cold and constrained; he had spoken but few words to her, and when he had left Renonçeux in the shame and the wrath of his enforced dishonour, in that moment, when her whole heart had gone out to him in its sweetest and most fervent sympathy, he had had no thought for her. He had left the château, he had left Renonçeux, he had left France for ever perhaps, and he had not said one word of farewell; he had not even so far remembered her as to leave a message with Albert to show he had not quite forgotten her existence yet.

The thought was very bitter. It haunted her incessantly now, as she dwelt on the events of the day, as she pictured Raoul's pain and Raoul's suffering, as she thought of the blow to his pride, and the shame to his honour, that his father's unjust and cruel will had been.

"No wonder he forgot me," she sighed to herself; "how could he remember anything in such an hour as *that*?"

Without, the wind was rising fast and fierce. The brief beauty of the autumn day had changed to storm and rain. The sky was black and starless, and the air chill and cold. But the girl's heart was chilled and darkened by a deeper gloom than any Nature bore, and she shivered as she bent nearer to the warm glow of the firelight, and her cheek paled, and her eyes had a vague and troubled sadness in their depths, born of that inward perplexity, that pain which throbbed so unceasingly in her breast, the pain which her own thoughts brought her.

While she sat alone in the firelight, there came a sudden glow

of radiance and colour in the room, and turning swiftly round she saw Blanche de Verdreuil enter. She had a small silver lamp in her hand, which she set down upon a stand near by, and then she swept gracefully up to Vivienne's side and seated herself in a low-cushioned fauteuil near her.

"I thought I should find you in the dark," she said. "How can you bear to sit alone on such a gloomy night as this? I am quite nervous from listening to the wind, although I have made Ednée stop all this time and read to me; but the girl grew so sleepy and made such stupid mistakes that I was obliged to dismiss her at last, and so I have come to you, Vivienne. What are you dreaming about in this semi-obscurity, *petite*?"

Her tone was more than usually caressing, but Vivienne felt a strange and more forcible repugnance to her than usual, in spite of that. She saw how feverishly bright her face was, and what a curious, triumphant glitter shone in her eyes when the languid lids no longer veiled them. A flush rose to the girl's cheeks as she answered,—

"I was thinking of all that has happened here to-day, madame."

"And your sympathies are of course with the disinherited knight," said Blanche, with a cold, scornful laugh, "that Bayard of the nineteenth century whom you deem so faultless. I hope he enjoys his prospects at this moment."

The hot colour burned deeper in Vivienne's face, and her voice trembled with indignation.

"How can you accept this wealth, knowing it is justly *his*?" she said passionately. "How can you bear to see him divested of his lawful rights, dishonoured in the sight of men, dismissed from his home and all whom he has loved and dwelt amongst, since his infancy? Oh! madame, can you live here and be happy knowing this?"

Blanche de Verdrenil's eyes glittered beneath their drooping lids with a fierce hate and scorn.

"What right have *you* to question my actions?" she said haughtily. "Do you forget *who you are*?"

The girl's face grew pale as death at the insolent scorn of the question.

"I do not," she said simply; "but even your benefits to me, madame, cannot outweigh my sense of justice, or permit me to think that, because you are my benefactress, all you do is right."

Blanche de Verdreuil laughed, the caustic, insolent laugh of security and pride.

"Do you suppose I came here to hear this—to have my actions questioned and arraigned by an outcast rescued from a

gutter? It is time, mademoiselle, that we came to an understanding as to our relative positions. I have born your insolence long enough; I am not going to do so any longer."

All her long jealousy, her bitter hatred of the girl spoke out in these words at last. There was no longer need to hide them; and Blanche de Verdreuil was to-night in just such mood as the tiger whose first taste of human blood makes him long for more; her first taste of vengeance did but create a thirst insensate and cruel, and she longed to visit it on the girl before her. The mask fell from her face; she revealed herself as she *was*, now there was no more necessity for her to act the part she had hitherto done.

Vivienne's face paled still more; her hand pressed tight against her heart to still its throbbing; her very lips were colourless as death.

"What do you mean?" she faltered.

"*Mean!*" The cruel laugh rang out again on the stillness. "You ask what I mean? Since you are so obtuse, I will soon tell you. I do not *mean* you to remain under my roof any longer, unless you choose to obey me, and be ruled by me implicitly. I have allowed you to have your own way hitherto, because it suited me; but I am a free agent now. I have unlimited wealth at my command; I have the world at my feet. In one way alone you can serve me, and if you choose to do so, my home shall still be yours, and the world you fooled so prettily with that mock innocence, that *ingénue* modesty, shall never know from whence you sprang, or who you are. Had you been less beautiful, all the genius in life would never have given you the position I gave you; for though you never knew or suspected it, the true history of your birth is only shame. Your father was a French nobleman certainly, but your mother was never his wife; she was only a poor Italian girl, with a fair face and a fine voice, whom he picked up on the stage of some second-rate theatre in Bologna, and he—"

"Who *dares* to say this of her?" Vivienne sprang to her feet, her face white as marble, her lips blanched, the agony and the shame in her eyes startling even her tormentor as she met their gaze.

"*I say it,*" she said coolly; "your nurse never told you, of course, but she told me, and she prayed and begged of me so earnestly to protect you that I promised to do it. It was a whim; you were a pretty child enough, and it pleased me to have some one here in the long months when I could not go to Paris. My husband was interested in you also. He said you reminded him of that picture in the gallery—that brother of his who died; you have heard the story often, I dare say. But as

I know this of you, you can scarcely suppose that I am going to have you arraign me, or sit in judgment on my actions, of whatever nature they are. For the first time in my life I feel free ; I taste the blessings of liberty, of wealth, of position ; and I say again, if you wish to remain with me, you may do so, but you must serve me in all ways as I wish, and I will keep your secret. The world esteems you nobly born ; I took good care of that. Well, they shall think so still ; I will not betray you as the nameless bastard, the poor, beggared cottage-girl I found ; only you shall obey me in all things. First and foremost you shall marry the Marquis d'Orvâl. You were mad enough to reject him in Paris ; but he loves you all the more because you are difficult to win. As his wife you can serve me well, and—”

“For what do you take me ?” cried Vivienne, her words breaking across Blanche de Verdreuil's insults with a depth of scorn, an unutterable horror. In that moment all the evil long hidden, all the truth long screened, flashed upon her, and filled her heart with a sickening, unspeakable loathing for this woman, whose real nature at last was laid bare to her sight.

“For what do you take me, that you say such words ? If you know my history, if it is true what you say of me, why have you deceived me and made me deceive others so long ? If you adopted and befriended me only to serve your own ends, why do you turn upon me now ? I have eaten your bread, I have accepted your benefits with all humility, not because I wished to do it, but because a promise to the dead bound me ; and now—” she paused ; her strength seemed to fail her ; her heart beat with a slow, sickening pain, that seemed to drain all the life from her veins—“*now* you counsel me to a worse dishonour still. Oh, God ! are you a woman, to speak such words, such insults ?”

“You will have to hear plainer speech, and less carefully veiled *insult*, as you call it, before long,” said Blanche, her eyes resting on the girl with a cruel, thirsty enjoyment of the torture she was inflicting. “I have told you my reasons for adopting you ; I have told you my conditions as to your future if you wish to remain with me. But you are at liberty to please yourself, to gratify your craze for the stage if you will. Perhaps, in time to come, the Marquis d'Orvâl may yet win for his mistress the girl who once scorned to become his wife !”

Her words fell on heedless ears now ; Vivienne scarcely heard or noted what she said, so keen a pain, so cruel a torture throbbed and quivered in her young, innocent heart.

She was a thing of shame, of no account. She had neither friend nor counsellor to seek. Instinctively she stretched her arms out to her persecutor with a faint cry of appeal.

"Have mercy! have pity!" she said in her agony. "Tell me those words are not true; tell me my mother bore no shame! that I, her child, at least may claim an unstained name from one whose love has been to me only a meaningless word all my life long!"

It was the one thought in her heart now; the one absorbing grief which made all others insignificant; this new vague horror, which touched her with shame for the lives she had hitherto revered; this first chill breath of the scorn and contumely, vaguely held for her in the utterance of that word "dishonour."

But she spoke to one without mercy, with only a jealous hatred of her beauty, the greater for its long concealment. This girl had won without an effort what Blanche had coveted all her life, and that thought maddened her. Her vengeance had fallen on the man who had once scorned her; so would she visit that vengeance equally and remorselessly on the girl he loved. They should both suffer; they should both feel the pain and the fever of heart they had given her to bear, and to inflict that pain and deal back that suffering she set herself unscrupulously to work, and so far her efforts had been successful.

"It *is* true," she answered Vivienne. "Surely your ignorance of the world is not so extreme that you cannot reason this fact out for yourself. Noblemen, even if poor, or exiled, or unfortunate, do not usually *marry* their inferiors in rank or station. Poverty they may excuse, but low descent never. Whatever you in your simplicity have believed, is quite erroneous, about as erroneous as another idea you have formed, and which has been remarked upon and laughed at more than you imagine. I speak of your ridiculous infatuation for Raoul de Verdreuil—an infatuation so marked and so indelicate that it drew down the scorn of many of my guests upon your head, and even disgusted the object of your affections so much that he left purposely to avoid you!"

The white face before her suddenly flushed to deepest crimson. The girl's whole nature was roused by the insult breathed in those words. Their shame lashed her gentle spirit to fierce anger and fiercer pride. The faintness left her, the weakness passed away. Like a dagger's thrust in her innocent heart those words pierced to its very core, bearing its secret to the scorn of other eyes, and tearing the veil from her own.

"Silence!" she cried, with calm contempt in her voice, though her heart throbbed and panted like a wounded bird, and the scarlet flush on her brow and cheek burned deeper and deeper in its agonizing shame, "you have said enough. What you mean by torturing and insulting a friendless and defenceless girl, as you have tortured me, I cannot understand. By your own volun-

tary wish I took up my abode with you. Are you lost even to the ordinary courtesies of hospitality when you address me thus ? I have accepted your favours, true ; but I never asked for or demanded them. They were free gifts, I supposed ; yet now they seem to you a reason for all the insult and contumely you can shower upon my head. At least, rest content with the suffering you have inflicted, and leave me in peace. It is the *last* favour I will ever ask or accept from you again."

For one moment the calmness and heroism of the girl cowed even the ruthless heart of her antagonist. She knew her words had pierced to the very core and centre of her being, yet she showed no sign, she acknowledged none of the inward agony rending and consuming her with fiercest pain. The greatness and purity of her love gave her strength to defend it, even amidst the suffering it brought her.

But Blanche de Verdreuil had given free rein now to all the worst passions of her nature, and with the next instant her voice rang out clear and cold and pitiless as ever.

"I shall not leave you until you have heard all I have to say to you, so you need not trouble yourself to put on those tragic airs again. Keep them for the life before you. You will need them, I dare say. I have told you my reasons for adopting you. I have also told you my conditions for your remaining here. You have not yet answered whether you accept them or not."

"You ask *that* ! Have you any doubt as to what my reply will be after what you have said ? Do you think I have neither womanly pride, nor womanly feeling left in me ?"

Her great lustrous eyes flashed out such a world of scorn, that Blanche de Verdreuil shrank from their lofty questioning, their indignant, fearless glance.

"You refuse me, then ?" she said, with the mocking, careless smile she had worn before. "*Soit*, mademoiselle ! May I ask what your intentions are with regard to the future ?"

The girl's face paled again.

"My life *here* ends to-night," she said, still speaking with that terrible calm. "Of my future, you shall know nothing. I go to a life in which you will have neither interest, nor control, nor place again. But I bear with me to the latest hour I live the punishment of my belief in *you* !"

Blanche rose to her feet then, stung at last by a reproach so simple, yet so touching.

"Very well," she said ; "you little know what you do ; of course you are an angel of innocence and purity, and the world believes in you only because you came to it with your hands full of gold, and your name set round with a shining circlet of honour ;

go to it now and see what it will say to you. Your very beauty will be your deadliest foe, unless—well, you will learn the alternative soon enough, I need not name it now. Nay, hear me out. I have one thing more to say. You accused me of wronging Raoul de Verdreuil, of having come into his possessions by injustice. Would you like to know why your faultless hero is banished from here? why his father deemed him no fitting representative of the rank and honours of his race? Well, I will tell you; it may prevent you from wasting all the sweetness of that virgin heart in vain. He loved *me*. Yes, you may start and look incredulous. He loved me, and his love was the one absorbing passion his life ever knew. One night he was mad enough to confess this, and when I scorned and rejected him, he knelt at my feet and prayed me never to betray him to his father. But in the midst of his wild prayers and passionate protestations his father himself entered. A terrible scene ensued, and it ended in Raoul being sent forth from here with this sole reward for his virtuous passion—disinheritance. Now perhaps you can read the secret of this strange will aright. Now perhaps you can sympathise with your ideal of truth and loyalty in his own enforced exile from the home he has himself dishonoured."

Vivienne had listened to these words as one spell-bound. With the last, speech sprang to her lips, passionate, fiery, uncontrolled. For herself she could bear pain silently, for *him* she had no power to keep her indignation curbed and controlled.

"It is false, all false!" she cried, her voice thrilling with intense feeling, with passionate unbelief. "Whatever you may say of Raoul de Verdreuil, I know him to be the very soul of honour; as for *you*, after your words to me to-night, I credit nothing, I believe nothing. Now have you said enough, or am I to be favoured with any more inventions?"

Blanche de Verdreuil's face paled at these words, they touched her as nothing before had done.

"You doubt me?" she said. "Think you I cannot guess why? You poor, doll-faced puppet, you thought to win him for yourself! You little know how he scorned and mocked at your scarce-concealed manœuvres. I tell you Raoul de Verdreuil never felt tenderness for living woman yet, *save for me*. If I held up my finger now, he would return and fall at my feet like the veriest slave that ever woman fooled. Believe it or not as you choose—*this*, and this alone, is the sole cause for his banishment, his ruin, his disinheritance. The world suspects it. I know it. He will be, from this day, the scorn of his friends, the jest of his foes. Now I leave you to your rest; I scarcely think your slumbers will be peaceful to-night, at least!"

She stood on the threshold—the lamp in her hand—the same cruel smile on her lips, the same gleam of triumph in her eyes. Then the door opened, closed upon her, and Vivienne was alone—at last.

A fearful horror seized her. The silence of the night seemed filled with voices mocking her misery, triumphing in her pain. She neither stirred nor moved, but stood there, with her hands tight pressed upon her heart, and such a look upon her face as only comes when all the life and faith and joy of a pure and sinless soul is smitten with a living death—is crushed, and broken, and destroyed for evermore in the first sweet summer of its dreams.

Once her lips moved,—a low moan, as of some wounded creature, stricken down with pain, escaped her.

"Oh God! why did I not die in my mother's arms? Why was I spared for such misery as this? If only my life could end this night!"

Heaven help us! How often we pray for death when sorrow's seal is set upon our lives! Were such prayers granted as we in our short-sighted wisdom desire, the world would have, little to teach us, the grave much!

CHAPTER X.

"MY HEART IS BREAKING."

"My eyes are full of tears, my heart of love,
My heart is breaking, and my eyes are dim,
And I am all aweary of my life."

Tennyson.

THE hour of midnight chimed in the silence.

Vivienne raised her head from the couch where she had thrown herself when Blanche de Verdreuil left her, and as the last stroke fell on her ear she rose to her feet. Her eyes were full of a strange, tearless agony—her face colourless as marble. The whole hideous truth of her life had been forced upon her at last. She who had deemed herself nobly-born—who was proud and fearless as any young queen with her rights of sovereignty, her stainless lineage—now knew herself to be a thing of shame; an outcast, with neither name nor honour to shelter her from the world's scorn.

She remembered now the cold looks, the veiled sneers of

Blanche de Verdreuil's guests. They must have known or suspected something even then, and yet how blind she had been ! No thought of the truth had ever crossed her mind, no suspicion of its real meaning flashed upon her till now. Her secret, her cherished secret, had been noted and whispered, and made the sport of cruel tongues and mocking lips. They had said that the cottage-girl—the beggar whom the Countess de Verdreuil had adopted—loved the heir of Renonçeux ! The shame and the torture of that thought were almost maddening to the girl's proud spirit. That what she had scarcely dared acknowledge even to herself should have been noticed and commented upon, bared to curious eyes, mocked at by scornful tongues, was agony to her now.

She never questioned the truth of what Blanche had told her : what her eyes had been able to read, other eyes had seen also, and Raoul's sudden coldness and altered manner were now a mystery no longer. She read their meaning all too well by the revelation of Blanche de Verdreuil's words. How he must despise her ! The flush of shame burned deeper on her brow each moment that she thought of it. In her ignorance and simplicity, it seemed to her the worst dishonour a woman could be guilty of, to let a man read her heart—to bare its secret to his eyes and the eyes of the world. She knew now why he had held aloof from her ; while she in her blindness had unconsciously been deceiving herself, he had deemed the best way to spare her was total avoidance of her presence. But did he love Blanche, she wondered. The horror of that thought was unspeakable. She had deemed Raoul de Verdreuil the very soul of honour. Could he be so base, so vile as to whisper love-words, and breathe his passion into the ears of his father's wife ? She shuddered from that thought as from some loathsome thing. She flung it from her as she would have flung some poisonous snake, whose slow, winding folds were creeping round her limbs. But all the life, and the faith, and the joy of her heart were killed in her—killed utterly and for ever, she thought, by a woman's treacherous words.

Blanche de Verdreuil had been cruel and merciless all her life long, but never so cruel as now, when she had wrung all the peace and innocence and sweetness of this fair life from out of it, as remorselessly as she might have wrung the song from a bird's throat in its first hours of praise and thanksgiving. With scarce a shadow of regret, without a vision of dishonour, Vivienne had lived up to this day. And now—now she knew that the farthest stretch of years could never give her back her innocent dreams, her rich, pure faith in woman's truth, in man's honour.

She heard the howl of the fierce wind, the rush and sweep

of the falling rain, and with a shudder she strove to collect her thoughts, all pained and bewildered as they were with the numbing terror of this heavy grief. She suffered those tortures which are doubly torture when they fall upon the innocent, and as she rose to her feet and listened to the wild warfare of the elements, one thought vaguely shaped itself out of the darkness and tumult of her mind, and on that thought she resolved to act.

“ I will never look upon her face again ! ” she murmured to herself, as she took off the trailing heavy silk of her mourning robe, worn that day for the first time in memory of the Count de Verdreuil.

Then she went to the wardrobe which contained her dresses, and selected a plain, dark travelling-dress of thick serge from amongst the many others. This she put on with trembling hands and beating heart, as though she meditated some act of guilt; then she seized a heavy mantle from its peg, and, drawing the hood over her head, turned to the window and looked out on the blackness and fierceness of the stormy night.

The rain was falling heavily ; the wind moaned and howled around the château. But the storm held no terrors for her ; her brain was fevered and excited, and reason held no spell to calm her in the terrible agony of that hour. She would have gone to death, had she known it lay before her, sooner than have slept another night under the shelter of Blanche de Verdreuil’s roof, sooner than have stood again in her presence, and seen that cruel smile of triumph in her eyes. That she was homeless and friendless as any wandering beggar she never remembered. That she had neither shelter nor help to seek, once she left Renonçeux, she never thought.

She opened her window and stepped out on the balcony beneath. From thence a flight of steps led to the gardens below, on the right of the terrace. She closed the window, and, drawing her cloak closely round her, went out to the darkness and solitude of the wild, stormy night. With no backward glance, but with a vague, nameless sense of fear, she hurried on, her slight figure shaken by the fury of the storm, as the fierce blasts from time to time swept over her. Her hood fell back, her hair, loosened by the wind, was tossed to and fro in spite of her efforts to twist it back under its covering. But she went on still, scarcely heeding the fury of the storm, the blinding, pitiless sweep of the rain. Her feet took the old familiar way to the wood which led to her old home. The wood where Raoul de Verdreuil had seen her three years before, as she stood by the brook-side and pictured to herself the fairy-like fancies of the life she was to live.

For one whole hour she pursued her way untiringly, scarce knowing how or where she went in the misery of her heart, and the death of all its joy and faith ; deaf and blind to everything now save the cruel, ceaseless pain which throbbed and beat in her brain with its own restless agony.

Her garments were drenched and heavy with the rain, they clogged her with their weight, and impeded her at every step ; her breath only came in short, fitful gasps. The fierce gusts shook her slight frame like a reed, and loosened the covering from her head, and tossed her long, floating hair to the winds, as if in mockery. Still she struggled on, pursued only by blind, unreasoning terror, sensible of nothing but that one desire to escape from the woman who had wronged and scorned and outraged every feeling of her heart ; on, on, through the darkness around ; through the narrow passage of the wood, where the boughs swayed, and tossed, and creaked, as the wind bent them like twigs in its fury ; on and over the mossy ground, all damp and sodden with the rain ; on through the windings and turnings of that narrow path, once so familiar to her steps ; on, still on, with her face colourless and set as if with the sternness of some great resolve. There was none to see, none to help, none to stay her, as with that fixed, desperate endeavour she still pursued her way. The death-like whiteness of her face never changed. The laboured beating of her heart grew each moment more painful. Then, suddenly, a dizzy, deadly faintness overwhelmed her. The fragile form reeled and shook like a lily on its stem. Above, in the clouded heavens, the faint, swift gleam of the moon shone out for one brief moment from its curtain of darkness—shone on the swaying form, the sweet, child-face upraised in its helpless misery to the pitiless storm—on the masses of loosened hair and the white lips parted in silent agony.

Then darkness veiled the heavens, and equal darkness swept over the senses of the weary girl below. Involuntarily she stretched her arms out to the gloom and the shadows around, as if seeking for support. The unnatural strength which had so long sustained her at last gave way, and she sank senseless down on the damp, leaf-strewn ground, her head resting on the mossy underwood of the forest-path, and her soft, trailing hair, all tangled and wet with the wind and the rain, veiling her unconscious form.

CHAPTER XI.

HOW THE PROMISE WAS KEPT.

“The sight of means to do ill deeds,
Makes ill deeds done.”

Shakespeare.

BRIGHT and fair dawned the morning after the storm, with neither trace nor shadow of the past night's fury to dim its brightness; and radiant as the morning itself the Countess de Verdreuil lay back amongst the soft cushions of her chair, and languidly sipped the chocolate her maid had just brought to her.

In her dainty dressing-room, with every mirror on the walls reflecting her own exquisite face, she was thinking triumphantly enough of the success her schemes had won for her.

She was free and untrammelled, her own mistress entirely. With unbounded wealth in her possession, with beauty, and youth, and strength to enjoy it, she knew she could command the world's homage now; that her wealth and her loveliness combined would bring crowds of suitors to her feet; but she resolved to taste the sweets of independence to the uttermost, ere again binding herself down to the bondage of matrimony. To be great, courted, powerful, enchanting; but above all, *free*. To go where she would, act as she pleased, scatter her wealth in every costly extravagance and fantastic fancy that pleased her; and yet give up her liberty to none till just such time as it suited her to do so.

Leaning negligently there, with that smile upon her lips, that glitter of triumph in her eyes, her maid thought she had very little of the appearance of a recently-bereaved widow; but then, as she said to herself afterwards,—

“If Monsieur le Comte chose to marry a young and beautiful lady, what could he expect but that his death would be only a release to be welcomed, not a loss to be mourned;” which reasoning of the pretty *soubrette* was very much like that of the world at large.

“I shall not remain here,” thought the countess to herself. “This old, gloomy château is *ennuyante* in the extreme. No, I shall spend the winter abroad, perhaps in Algiers, I have never been there; or at Rome, I should like to see the Carnival again; anywhere out of France for the present, as I must of course keep

up the pretence of mourning for a while. Abroad no one will calculate how many months it is since I have worn crape, or what depth of mourning I choose to introduce in my attire whenever I go out."

"I wonder how Vivienne is this morning," she continued, setting down her cup, and gazing musingly at the bright fire before her. "I am almost sorry I spoke so plainly as I did last night—only the girl is too beautiful to keep beside me, and she grows so intolerable insolent that I can make no use of her at all. I think, however, I have effectually put a stop to her grand airs and queenly graces. I shall have no more of them now she knows who she is. If she would be a little more humble, and do as I wish, I would still keep her here; or if she is still obstinate and blind to her own interests, I might get her on the stage at the leading opera-house in Paris. I don't wish the girl to be ruined after all, now that I have effectually put an end to her love affair, and her foolish notions of high birth and noble descent. If she goes on the stage Raoul will never look at her again; I think I have played my cards too well for *that*; and if she does not, and consents to remain with me, I shall insist upon her marrying the Marquis d'Orvâl. She must have been mad to refuse him; I think such an offer would even tempt *me*."

She smiled complacently at herself in the opposite mirror at the thought, and then rang a small hand-bell near to summon her maid.

"Ask Mademoiselle St. Maurice to come to me here," she said as the girl entered, and then she fell languidly back amongst the cushions again with an assumption of ease and indifference she was far from feeling.

She could not forget Vivienne's agonized look the previous night, nor her words of piteous entreaty as she heard that story of her mother's shame, and besought Blanche to deny its truth. If the girl had known that it was wholly and entirely a fabrication on the part of her enemy, with no foundation save in her own evil mind, what would her feelings be now? A low, cruel laugh escaped Blanche de Verdreuil's lips; hushed quickly and instantaneously, however, as footsteps approached her room, and the door suddenly opened.

Her maid entered—alone—with a white, scared face, and shaking hands.

"*Pardon*, madame! but Mademoiselle St. Maurice is not in her room!"

"Not in her room!"

Blanche started up from her graceful attitude. "Not in her room; well, seek her then, she must be somewhere in the château. In the music-room or the *salon*, perhaps. Don't stand

gazing at me with that white face, girl! You look as if you had seen a ghost!"

Ednée faltered out some half-intelligible apology, and then went on to say that Mademoiselle St. Maurice's maid had been to her room that morning, and found it all in disorder; her dresses heaped about in various directions, the bed had never been slept in, and the servants one and all declared that nothing had been seen or heard of mademoiselle that morning in any part of the château.

Blanche de Verdreuil's delicate cheek turned a shade paler at the news. This hare-brained, desperate girl had evidently resolved to scandalize her by flight, and flight sudden and stealthy as this had been. Well, it was of no consequence to her, she was well rid of her. She had chosen to act in this wild, headstrong manner, and she must abide by the consequences. She gave the girl orders to have an instant search made for her ward through every part of the château and the grounds. "Not that I suppose you will hear anything of her," she said coldly; "my belief is that she has eloped with some one whom I had forbidden her to marry. That is I expect the true secret of her flight."

The girl, wondering at the little concern her mistress took in Vivienne's extraordinary departure, left the room in silence to give the necessary orders for the search.

"If it had been anybody else but mademoiselle," she said wonderingly, "I should not have been surprised; but she—so gentle, so sweet, so good—to fly in the dead of night like a thief from the home of her guardian! it is *incroyable*; and on the very day when Monsieur le Comte has been buried too, and she always so gentle and loving to him! I cannot understand it at all!"

Nor any one else, save the fair, smiling woman nestled in her dainty boudoir, and murmuring softly to herself as she thought of Vivienne's flight in the wild storm and the tempestuous darkness of the past night; "So much the better for me, she has taken all the responsibility of her future out of my hands, and she can do what she likes with herself now. I am thankful enough I shall see her no more. I hate her when I think that Raoul loved her."

So Blanche de Verdreuil kept her promise to the dead.

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BOOK IV.

CHAPTER I

NECESSITY OWNS NO LAW.

"Self-reverence, self-knowledge, self-control ;
 These three alone lead life to sovereign power."

Tennyson.

It was the time of the Carnival at Rome.

Fantastic cars and gorgeous chariots, and crowds of grotesque maskers thronged the Corso. The shouts and the jests and the uproar of the laughing, struggling multitude were almost deafening. From the festooned windows and gaily-draped balconies of the houses men and women leaned to laugh and jest at the crowd below, while they tossed flowers, and sweetmeats, and gilded toys into the carriages as they passed.

All were mad and merry with the mirth and licence of the Carnival ; grotesque, laughter-loving, riotous with a nation's forgetfulness of pain—a people's reaction and caprice though the great, weary, fettered heart beat on beneath that surface of mirth, and the yoke of tyrannous error was heavy on their lives.

They forgot the pain, they forgot the suffering, they forgot the confused sense of wrong struggling and seeking for right which oppressed their more rational moments, and they gave themselves up unreservedly to the follies and the licence of Carnival time, greeting the old king once more with the loyalty and delight that he at least had never forfeited. They crowned him still with the faith and the gladness, and the free, spontaneous mirth of a jesting, laughter-loving nation.

Standing in the shadow of an archway, gloomy even in the clear, sunshiny splendour of that winter day, Raoul de Verdreuil

watched the shifting, changing brilliant scene before him. He had been a week in Rome, and this was the first day of the Carnival. To him it was no new sight; he had seen it in Germany, in Florence, in Verona, as well as in the great capital, and he watched it now with scarce a smile for its follies, or an ear for its jests; it seemed to him but a mockery of pleasure, a pretence of mirth, tossed by the hands of tyranny to bind the errors of superstition still closer to a people's heart, just as a painted bauble tossed to a child stills its cries, and pacifies its desires for the time being.

His grave eyes wandered over the crowd, and scanned the faces in the windows with supreme indifference; Raoul felt but little interest in either one or other. The memories of his past life were still with him; he had borne with its desolation, and carried its unmerited dishonour deep-rooted in his heart, and the pain was keen and sharp as ever—the sense of unmerited wrongs poisoned much of the happiness and content that still might have been his. He never forgot that he was the first of his race on whom the ban of disinheritance had fallen. The thought of his enemy living in his home, squandering his wealth, triumphing in his possessions, was keenest torture to him. Though none had heard him lament, he suffered all the more because of his proud reticence, his outward indifference, his serene, untroubled calm.

The world had marvelled enough at his father's strange will, and much pity and unbounded sympathy were felt and expressed for the young count, but he calmly and gravely put it aside with a coldness that froze all its well-meant kindness into silence.

He was the last man in the world to lay bare his heart to others. He shrank from pity as an insult, from sympathy as from pain. He hated to think that he was an object for the world's commiseration, and therefore fenced himself round with a barrier of deeper reserve than before this shame had touched him. That he had been wronged all knew and none doubted, but his own lips never let fall a word to enlighten them as to the reason, or allow them to imagine the result. For the sake of his manhood, for the pride of his race, Raoul de Verdreuil resolved that none should ever read the weakness of his heart, or have power to say his life had been wrecked and marred by the injustice dealt to him. He had met his disgrace with the weapon of indifference, and in adversity as in prosperity none had ever heard a regret from his lips, or seen the haughty pride and serene composure of his nature moved or disturbed. His brilliant talents shone forth amidst his clouded fortunes with additional lustre, and while men marvelled at his serene and unmoved en-

duration of wrong, they marvelled more at the power and grandeur of an intellect whose might ruled and swayed them as it had never done before, and which from very force of suffering won its noblest triumphs.

Yet Raoul de Verdrenil had his dark moments, all the more dark and hopeless, because he opened his heart to none, because he shut himself out from all sympathy, and let no one know how keen an anguish filled his soul—how deep a grief had poisoned all his life. At times a thirst for vengeance seized him, and all the worst and fiercest passions of his nature tempted him to avenge his wrongs. All the dreams of his youth came back, and with them the loss of the heritage he had loved and revered, as the one fairest, brightest spot in all the earth. Then he remembered the woman who had wronged him, and he longed with a fierce, terrible longing to give her back measure for measure; to fill her life with the shame, and the misery, and the endless pain that his own had become to him now.

Times there were too when, amidst the tumult and the beauty of foreign cities a great, heart-sick, restless desire oppressed him—a desire to see once more the familiar beauty of the home he had lost. Some dream would bear him back to it again, and he saw the fresh, sweet shade of forest leafage, and the vast expanse of park and woodland, the purple bloom of vineyards, the gleam of blossoming orchards, and then—he woke to memory, and thought in bitterness of heart to whom he owed his loss! Then all his philosophy vanished, and a passionate agony consumed him, and in such moments as these, Raoul de Verdrenil had no mercy, and no remorse, but set himself with stern and desperate endeavour to achieve the purpose he had sworn as he looked his last on the home a woman's treachery had snatched from him.

Such had been his life during the months that had passed since he left Renouveau, and now in the bright, clear glow of the winter sunshine he found himself once more at Rome, while King Carnival held his court in the streets and the palaces, and mirth and madness filled the whole city with reckless delight.

While he waited and watched it all from the archway where he had found standing-place on a flight of half-broken steps, his eyes rested for a moment on a balcony opposite.

He started—leant forward more eagerly as if in doubt—and then all the calmness and coldness of his face changed as if by magic. His eyes flashed scorn, the dusky glow of anger burned on his brow, for there before him—with the sunshine sparkling on her face, with smiles on her lips, with a crowd of men flattering, bending, waiting on her as courtiers on a sovereign—sat the woman who had wronged him.

She looked beautiful as ever as she leant there with her arms on the marble balustrade, the rich, soft, velvet folds of her dress framing in her beauty by its dark hues, as the ebony frame of a picture heightens the glowing colours and delicate hues of the painting itself. Her eyes laughed down at the crowd below as she tossed them the gilded bonbons with which her hands were filled, and in her joyous, careless mirth, the eyes of the man she had wronged and defrauded rested on her once more.

He never took his gaze from her face, and at last it seemed as if the strange magnetic force of that fixed look compelled her own eyes to turn in his direction. She saw him then—stern, relentless unforgiving—as she had seen him in a thousand dreams, a thousand fancies, since the hour they had parted.

No thought of meeting him in Rome had crossed her mind. She thought he had long left the city, and now amidst the riot and the mirth of the Carnival they met again.

Over the heads of the people, breathless, panting, laughing, as they thronged every street and passage, and doorway, the eyes of these two met—the woman who had wronged, and the man who suffered for the wrong. That look spanned and bridged the intervening space with its relentless purpose on the one side, its mute and haughty defiance on the other. But in that moment Blanche de Verdreuil's heart felt the same chill, deadly terror as when, in the hour of her promised triumph, she read the merciless determination of the man she had made her bitterest foe.

"He has not forgiven me," she thought, as she turned her eyes away from the pitiless face in the shadows of the archway below. "He never will forgive me now. Yet I am secure enough. Why should I fear him?"

But, all the same, she *did* fear him, in spite of her efforts to believe herself safe, in spite of her pride of possession, her splendid beauty, her vast wealth. Though the world smiled on her, and lovers worshipped her, and every costly fancy or caprice she formed she could gratify at will, Blanche de Verdreuil could not forget the past; could not blind herself to the fact that she was treading over a mine which at any moment might explode and bury her beneath its ruins. Of remorse or of pity she never thought, but *fear* could touch her still.

When her terror had subsided, and the colour stole back to her face, and the light to her eyes, the countess glanced once more in the direction of her enemy. The archway was deserted. Raoul de Verdreuil had gone.

* * *

Night in Rome.

The vast squares, and carved columns, and majestic ruins of the

city are bathed in the clear light of the new-risen moon. Far away from the lighted streets, and the shining windows and the noisy crowds, a man wanders alone. His step is swift, his eyes seek the ground, his face is dark with stormy passions, and while he hurries on in the clear, frosty, starlit night, he sees nothing of the splendid magnificence and ruined grandeur around him ; of all the beauty desolate with neglect, yet grand in its decay which Art once raised, and Genius sanctified ere centuries of change and storms of war had swept over the Eternal City.

As he reaches the Forum he pauses and looks round ; a shadow, stealthy, and indistinct flits behind a ruined pillar near by, a shadow that has dogged his footsteps since he left the city itself. The shadow of a man gaunt, large-eyed, with a woolfish, hungry look in his face, with the stamp of want and woe on his brow. He crouches behind the pillar, and the man he has followed is all unconscious of his presence ; he stands with the wild grasses crushed beneath his feet, and his back against the ruined arch which towers in lofty, solitary grandeur against the background of the starry sky, amidst the dusk of the gloomy shadows.

The Forum is deserted, silent—still with the stillness of a world-forgotten greatness brooding over its desolate beauty. The ghosts of buried ages hold solemn meetings there ; martyred saints and mighty lives haunt the forsaken ruins which once held all the pomp and glory of Rome. The weight of memories oppresses the silence, the measureless achievements of the past point backwards to triumphs great and noble, to deeds grand and brave. The glory that *has been* still lingers there, still illumines the dim, unknown depths of the Eternal City itself, and the mantle of reverence covers the nakedness of her desolation, and hides pityingly the ravages of time.

The moon-rays fall on the face of the man who has come thither in weariness of heart and bitterness of spirit, who has fled from the noisy pleasure-seekers in the lighted streets beyond, who seeks in solitude what others seek in recklessness and riot, and pleasures of the senses—forgetfulness of suffering !

The shadow of the watcher near him crouches lower and lower, in the attitude of a beast of prey about to spring on the victim it has marked for itself. The lean, nervous hand clutches firmly the glittering steel of the weapon with which he is armed—the long, sharp blade of an Italian bravo, the blade of which he is about to plunge in the heart of the unconscious and defenceless man whom he looks upon merely as lawful prey for his own necessities to feast upon.

The lurking attitude, the cruel, stealthy watch, tell their own tale too well. Hunger and want are the two demons which make men criminals, and these two demons have fast hold of the

wretched, cowering creature keeping that midnight watch, and seeing his deadliest foe only in a stranger whom Fortune has given all she has denied to him.

And the man he watches suspects no danger, fears no harm, as wrapped in his own gloomy, revengeful thoughts he leans against the ivy-crowned stonework of the ruins.

The moon is behind a cloud now, the shadows are denser and deeper; swiftly the crouching form creeps out from its hiding-place, and glides forward in that momentary gloom.

There is a cry—a struggle.

Then the moon shines forth again, clear, bright, pitiless as ever—shines on two forms locked and closed in that terrible struggle for life which only comes when chances are desperate, and help impossible. Reeling, swaying, striving, they wrestle breast to breast, one face stern and fearless, even in its sudden sense of danger; the other black and fierce with evil passions, lustful with the thirst for blood, the greed of gold, the desperation of want.

The struggle is short and swift, the strength of the combatants unequal; for while the frame of one is firm, well knit, and powerful, that of his would-be assassin is feeble with hunger and fasting, and his lips grow white with fear as he feels how weak he is in the hands of his powerful antagonist.

Suddenly, with a swift, supple movement, he frees his right arm.

There is a gleam of steel in the moonlight as the blade quivers aloft, but ere it can strike its way to the heart of his opponent, the wrist is seized, the weapon wrenched away, and the man himself falls down helpless, breathless, and stunned at the feet of Raoul de Verdreuil.

CHAPTER II.

"COALS OF FIRE."

"The voice of the dead was a living voice to me!"

Tennyson.

BREATHLESS, panting, powerless, the fallen man looked up in the face of his conqueror, while he lay at his feet half stunned by the force with which he had been thrown there.

Raoul's eyes looked down on him with a dim sense of compassion striving with the loathing and disgust he felt for the

coward who would have taken his life without a regret, for the mere sake of the gold on his person.

"Why have you done this?" he asked, as he watched his prostrate foe struggling back to life and sensibility again. "What harm have I ever done to you that you should seek to take my life?"

There was no anger in his voice; it was grave and stern, yet compassionate withal, for he saw this poor outcast was in dire want, and he knew that need and desperation too often go hand in hand. The man looked up at him with a dim wonder in his eyes, replacing all their former ferocity.

"I am starving," he said half fiercely, as he raised himself to a sitting attitude. "Hunger makes brutes of us all when we have nought but that to fill our lives; it makes us ready to curse God and man, to steal, or lie, or murder—as I would have murdered you, signor, a moment ago."

Raoul's face softened.

"You speak like an educated man, not a beggar," he said. "How comes it you have fallen so low as this?"

The man slowly gathered himself from the ground, faint, blind, staggering still from bodily weakness, as well as from the blow which had felled him. He rose to his feet, cowed and quelled, like a beaten hound; had his weapon been in his hand at that moment, he would not have either strength or will to use it. He accepted his defeat, and bent to his conqueror like a slave.

"How comes it? you may well ask that," he said bitterly. "I have been unfortunate all my life. I have had few chances, and they have never prospered. I have dragged on an existence of shame, of beggary, of wretchedness for years past. But what I have been matters not; look at what I am."

"It is that I look at, and for that I pity you," said Raoul. "You say you have had few chances; are you sure you have utilized chances when they fell in your way? Wise men compel opportunities, if they do not always come to them. You must have been singularly unfortunate to have descended to a bravo's skill, and an assassin's cowardice for bread. Do you know I can hand you over to the authorities for this attempt on my life?"

"I know it," was the reply.

"At least you might have given me some notice of your intentions," pursued Raoul. "A man does not mind a fair fight for his life, but to be taken unawares is not exactly pleasant. Supposing our positions were reversed, and I had been lying at your feet at the present moment, what would you have done?"

"Robbed you, undoubtedly; killed you, most probably," was

the cool answer. "I should have only thought of my necessity, signor, as it is—"

"As it is I must think of it for you," said Raoul, in the same half-mocking, jesting voice he had used throughout the conversation. "Well, let me hear what you want?"

The man was silent, abashed by this unexpected treatment. He could not understand it.

"You think I am not in distress," he said sullenly; "that my misery is only a subject for jest?"

"God forbid!" said Raoul earnestly. "I jest at no man's misery. I am willing to help you if you tell me what I can do, but I do not wish to give you the mere temporary relief of gold: it will be spent, wasted perhaps, and in a month you will fall back on your old trade again. Tell me what you were. A man of education should always be able to keep bread in his mouth at all events. There are dire straits of poverty, I know, but still there are other ways of gaining a livelihood than by crime."

"Do you think I do not know it?" cried the man passionately, as he pushed the dark tangled curls from his brow, and raised his head with a gesture of mingled scorn and defiance. "What I was *once*—you wish to know that. My name was on men's lips, and in women's hearts, and I had wealth as much as I wanted; and love, ah! love that turned my life to poison, and my heart to sin, and stamped me with a memory hideous and false, yet alluring still. But that is all over for ever. The fair side of life has long been unknown to me. Of the dark I could tell you much more, did you care to hear it?"

"I do not," said Raoul, in the same gentle tones he had used before. "I can imagine what it must have been to have brought you to *this*."

No rebuke or reproach could have stung the man so deeply as those few simple words. He looked at the calm, noble face before him, and wondered why its pity was so deep, its compassion so infinite.

There were men in the world degraded, debased, criminal as himself, who could have told of like forbearance and like compassion on the part of Raoul de Verdreuil—men whom he had rescued and saved from vice, from infamy, from their own evil natures, their own vicious ways; and yet the world called him cold and heartless—a man without sympathy, without love. So we judge of those we cannot understand!

A moment, and the old fierce light shone in the man's eyes, the old savage mockery rang in his voice.

"Can you? I doubt it. All things have gone fair and smoothly with you. How can you read the wrongs and imagine

the temptings which beset a man so fallen as I am now? How can you, who look of the great ones of the world, know aught of the foulness and treachery which lurk in the dark places of the earth, which pollute the fairest life? In mine there is misery you cannot fathom—wrongs that gods could not pardon!"

"Is it so?"

Raoul's thoughts wandered back to his own past. Had he not also suffered; had his misery not bowed him to the dust; had he not also felt as if he knew wrongs that gods could not pardon? Mockery, shame, dishonour, loss. His heart softened to the wretched being before him. His eyes rested on him with a deeper compassion. He saw that in spite of the ravages of want and hunger the face was delicately moulded; the form slight and graceful. He was no longer young, but vice and famine had sharpened and aged his features even more than time. The dark, olive skin, the black, glittering eyes, and tangled, jetty curls proclaimed his southern origin, and the fluency and ease with which he spoke Italian made Raoul imagine he must be a native of the country.

"Well!" he said, suddenly rousing himself from his abstraction, "while I talk you are famishing. Listen, I will give you enough money to buy you food and secure you a lodging for to-night. To-morrow come to me again, and I will see what I can do for you. Any hour after sunset you will find me at this address."

He pencilled a few words in Italian and handed it to the man, who regarded him for some moments in too great amazement for speech.

Suddenly he threw himself down before him—thanking, blessing, weeping like a child, with all the fervour and passion of southern expletives gracing the eloquence of his words.

"Signor, signor! I came here to-night a devil; you have made me a man. You have given back life to my body, and feeling to my heart. In all my life to come you shall do with me as you will. I am yours from this night forward! I would go to death for you as willingly as I would have dealt it to you only an hour ago!"

And he meant it.

His life had been evil, cruel, merciless for long years past. He had not known a single good or kindly thought of his species. In all the agonies, and the evils, and the desolation of his soul no pity, no charity had relieved him; and now the man he would have murdered with as little regret as he would have taken the life of bird or beast that might serve him for food—this man

alone, of all he had ever met, succoured him ; nay, more, had thought of his soul as well as his body. He did not rest content with relieving him from the one pressing necessity of want—he dealt to him a surer mercy ; he sought to raise and rescue his moral nature from the depths of its degradation, and therefore it was that his gratitude was so rich and passionate in its first full abandonment of thankfulness, therefore it was that he saw in Raoul de Verdreuil not a saviour only, but a man great and noble with the one true greatness that sways humanity with the force of its own truth and power.

Raoul stopped his words at last.

"No thanks are needed," he said quietly, "I have done but little. Reserve them till there is need. How do you know I am to be trusted ? I may ere to-morrow have handed you over to the authorities."

The man looked up at him, a dog-like fidelity shining in the eyes lately so fierce and brutal.

"You would but do right even then," he said ; "I have no claim on your mercy or your charity. I only wonder you did not kill me as I lay here. It would have been only just if you had !"

Raoul was more moved than he cared to show. How utterly broken down was the whole wild, brutalized nature before him ; and by what ? a few, simple words spoken as from man to man ; not a superior to an outcast. That was all, and what magic it had worked ! What magic it would still work Raoul never guessed then. He little thought that this act of his to-night, which had changed a murderer to a faithful slave henceforward, would be the key to a mystery he longed to fathom, would give to him the vengeance he sought, the justice he claimed.

"But you know I shall not do it," he answered him, placing some gold in the man's hands. "No, I wish to give you a better chance of living,—an object in life, if possible. Now, take this—it will give you food, shelter, and clothing ; to-morrow night I shall expect you !"

And waiting no longer to hear the fervent thanks, the murmured blessings of a life rescued from worse than death, Raoul walked swiftly away to the distant city, while above him the starlit beauty of the night shone as the sole witness of a deed noble, generous, trustful as the heart which had prompted it—a deed destined to bring forth results great and marvellous, such as neither benefactor nor receiver imagined.

* * * *

One hour after sunset, the day following that strange adventure in the Forum, Raoul de Verdreuil awaited the man who had attempted his life.

He almost started when he saw him, so great a change had taken place in his appearance. He could scarcely recognize him as the miserable, starving object who had cowered at his feet the night before, looking the very essence of brutalized, debased humanity. The wolfish, hungry look had left his eyes ; the tangled, jet black curls were no longer matted and disordered ; the slight, supple form was clad in well-fitting and suitable garments ; and as he advanced and bowed low before the man who had thus rescued him, and given him back the feelings and the instincts so long strangers to his nature, Raoul looked well pleased at the change, and welcomed him cordially.

The more the man spoke, the more his benefactor marvelled at his fluent, graceful speech, his varied knowledge, the evidence of culture and refinement in his words and manner. How could he have sunk so low as to become a midnight assassin ? He listened, and pondered what he could do for him, and the more he pondered the more puzzled he became.

"What have you been ?" he asked him at last.

"I—many things in my life. The secret of my ruin is soon told ; it is contained in one word—gambling."

"Ah !"

The expression fell softly from Raoul's lips. This solved the mystery—this accounted for the fall. He looked musingly at the man for some moments, then he said,—

"A bad trade, and a ruinous one, my friend. To peril life, and peace, and future on the turn of a wheel—the faith of a card ! I cannot wonder that you are what you are, if such has been your life."

"I used to have luck once," said the Italian, with a strange, wistful regret in the tones of his voice, "but fortune mocked me, and the more I sought her the more I lost ; and then I grew reckless, desperate, mad I believe. I lost honour, faith, love, all in a single night by the turn of a card, and since then I have not cared what became of me."

Raoul looked at him in silence.

"I am sorry for you," he said gently, "but of all trades a gambler's is the one I most despise. I would as soon pin my faith to a drunkard's promises as to a gambler's word. I wish to help you with all my heart, but how can I trust you ? The first tempting of the dice will draw you towards it irresistibly with all the old fascination. My labour will be wasted ; my counsels forgotten."

The Italian approached him with a grave, steadfast resolve in his face, that ennobled and purified it for the moment from all its traces of vice and ignominy.

"Signor," he said earnestly, almost sadly, "I have no claim

upon your kindness. Nay, rather, I deserve all your severest justice, not your clemency and forbearance. But I will promise you this. I owe you a debt of gratitude which no words can express, nor any act repay. I promise you that I will never again touch card or dice, and I will keep my word, only say you believe me."

There was no withstanding the earnest appeal, the almost piteous entreaty of those words. Faith might save him, disbelief might ruin him. Raoul read that plainly enough, and he was not one to do work by halves.

"I believe you," he said, gravely, "and with that promise I give you back my trust again. Give me your hand on it."

The man looked at him in utter amazement.

"My hand—you ask for my hand, and I—great Heaven! I would have taken your life like a dog!"

"No matter; I may need your services. I should like to feel I can depend on them—and *you*."

The man seized his outstretched hand with an outburst of gratitude so fervent that Raoul could hardly silence it. But he knew that the life he had won back from the deep abyss of misery and crime was his from that day forward, for good or evil.

"If I might never leave you, if I might always feel you near, it is life and strength to me once more!"

These were the words of the Italian as he rose at last from an interview long and full of purpose and of good, yet all too short for him, in his overpowering gratitude to the man who had saved him in his misery.

Raoul looked at him searchingly.

"You would like that?" he said.

"Like it! Ah, signor, with you I forget my infamy, my shame. I feel my lost youth revive, my lost hopes live, my lost ambitions waken!"

"You shall have your wish then, for a time at least," said Raoul, with a sudden, quick resolve: "your knowledge of languages answers to one great requirement of my present position. I have so much correspondence on my hands that I was thinking only yesterday of applying for a secretary to assist me. For one month I will let you have the post. It is one of trust and responsibility as well as of work. You will be under my own eye entirely, and according as you evince your capability so will I reward your labours. What do you say to my offer?"

"Say!" stammered the man, too utterly confounded almost for speech.

"Is my proposal so very extraordinary?" said Raoul, smiling. "The world would doubtless call it Quixotic, but then I

have never let the world's opinions interfere with my actions. Our present compact is made between ourselves as between man and man—you are free to accept or refuse it as you wish."

"Do drowning men accept life, do prisoners accept freedom? Ob, signor, even as salvation, liberty, rescue, comes your offer to me! May the mercy you have shown be rewarded to you a thousand times! Your trust shall never be misplaced—I swear it!"

Into the darkened room shone the clear, pure beauty of the evening star. In the heavens above there was light, radiant, glorious, peaceful. But into the darkened heart and sin-wrecked life of the man whose head was bowed in the fulness of his gratitude and joy there stole a peace as deep, a light as pure—the light of hope restored, of a soul rescued and saved from the guilt of a terrible past, from the grave of sin and despair.

CHAPTER III.

A CHARMED CUP.

"Thou hast a charmed cup, O Fame!
A draught that mantles high,
And seems to lift this earthly frame above mortality."

Mrs. Hemans.

A QUIET old room in a quiet little German town.

Three people are seated there one chill evening in early spring. The fire-light shines on the dark oak furniture, the carvings of the chairs and picture-frames, the smooth, well-waxed floor, so characteristic of a German home. It differs from the generality of them in one respect however; it has no hideous, comfortless stove in the corner, but an open hearth, on which a bright fire blazes and crackles cheerfully, and whose ruddy glow falls on the white head of an old man bending low over the flames; on the fair, smooth, placid face of a young girl near him, his daughter; and again, on the clear-cut, delicate profile of a young man seated in the darkest and most shadowy corner of the room playing.

What music it was! Poetic, ethereal, sublime; and yet how far below the dreams of excellence, the sublime ideals of the player! It thrilled out on the silence of the firelit room; its passionate prayers—its divine, unearthly dreams, filled the

chamber with a flood of richest melody ; and the old man bowed his head as he listened, feeling again the memories of his dead youth throbbing in his heart, seeing as through the golden haze of past belief the joys of his once glad faith ere time and the world had chilled it. The young girl beside him dropped the work from her hands and folded them idly on her lap, and her eyes grew dim with wistful pain, with vague longings ; for the player was very dear to her.

She looked at him as she sat mute and silent, listening to his music—to her ever the sweetest in the world.

"It seems too beautiful for earth," she said softly, as his fingers left the keys, slowly and lingeringly as though they loved their touch.

"Probably that is the reason why the world will have none of it," he said, with a faint smile, as he turned towards her.

Into the music he had woven the story of his own life, the weariness of his own longings, the failure of his own dreams. It was like a story whose truth to nature and to life appealed to the experience of individual hearts, whose sweet, sad mysteries woke all the slumbering memories of bygone years and thrilled the listeners' hearts with passionate regrets, with the pain of long buried hopes, with all the fancy and sweetness of the past.

To the old man it had spoken of youth and its fair promises ; to the girl, of an awakened soul, whose instincts, ever stretching heavenwards, were yet clogged and bound by earthly chains. To the player himself it told of divine possibilities, of hidden powers, of all that Youth and Faith behold in the dreams that visit them. It was beautiful exceedingly, but in its beauty there lingered a touch of sadness, like the key-note of its melodies, the inspiration of its themes ; and sorrow thrilled even amidst its joy, like the pain and the fear of a heart overweighed with its own great happiness.

A silence filled the room as the music ceased, broken only by the fall of the wood ash on the hearth. Then the player left his seat and came forward in the full glow of the firelight.

He was Albert Hoffmann ; but not the same Albert who had been wont to look upon life as a pleasant dream, a place for fancies and imaginings. In truth, he had found it far otherwise since he had been thrown on his own resources, since the death of his guardian had left him totally unprovided for, and he was obliged to fight the battle of life for himself and wake from dreams to realities. He had never known or heeded the value of money, and now he learnt its use—nay, its absolute necessity. He was utterly penniless save for his own scanty earnings, and they barely sufficed to give him the comforts of a home with his

master—a home very different from the luxuries and magnificence of Renonçeux.

Professor Eltermein was himself a poor man ; all his learning and experience had not sufficed to make him famous during his lifetime. The world will never recognize what it cannot understand : and he had loved art for its own sake too well to study popularity, which was perhaps the reason that he was a poor man still, though great in reputation, and vast and profound in all the theoretical and practical knowledge of his art.

The professor had many pupils, but of them all, none was so great a favourite as Albert Hoffmann. In him he recognized the greatness of a genius far more exalted than ordinary talent ; and in the young artist's struggles and difficulties he seemed to live his own youth over again, and fight the same battles with the world's selfishness and blindness as his pupil fought for the first time.

But he knew what Albert did not, that the victory lay with a man's own powers of endurance, and that, because that endurance so seldom could hold out against the pressure of bodily need and bodily weakness, genius such as fired his heart now, had too often succumbed to the world's will and given simply what was demanded, not what it craved to give—nobler teachings, grander truths, diviner conceptions. And, knowing this, he was ever pitiful and tender to the young dreamer by his side, and encouraged his lofty aspirations to yet greater heights, nor permitted him to let any work fall into the time-worn grooves of mere commonplace, such as the world applauds most, because it can understand it best.

The profession Albert followed is one seldom inclined to treat its followers with generosity. His greatest works had been the last to recompense him. His music differed essentially from other music, and the world has ever a strange suspicion of the man who dares to be original. That which demands thought and attention, which soars to loftier heights and embodies diviner ideals than men are accustomed to behold, is not that which pleases them best.

The greatest genius is seldom that which reaps its rewards in its own lifetime. The mediocre is, after all, the safest food on which to feed the world, if men would but enjoy life and sacrifice fame in order to believe it.

It dawned upon the young artist gradually that his sublime creations, his ambitious dreams, his hopes of fame, were not the food for daily life. The hardest lesson a human heart can learn is that which brings to genius the sordid cares of necessity, which weights its pinions with earthly wants, and brings it down to the level of a world it would fain forget. And to be honest to genius

is to refuse to walk in the way the world would have us walk, or prostitute the noblest gifts of God to the base uses of men.

Albert Hoffmann had to learn these truths as others before him have had to learn them, as others after him will learn them, while the world goes on its own way, sacrificing merit with the thoughtlessness of neglect, giving to genius contempt in life, and fame in death as its best and surest reward.

He had lived many months in the quiet little German town where he was now. Of Raoul he had heard from time to time, as he wandered here and there in the restlessness of his spirit or the exigencies of foreign policy; but of Vivienne he knew nothing. He imagined she must be still with the Countess de Verdreuil; and as in his correspondence with Raoul the subject of Renonçeux was always avoided, neither of the friends ever guessed that the beautiful ward of the countess had been driven forth from her protection, and that her fate was a mystery to all who had ever known her; and Raoul never guessed that either the girl he had loved so madly was thrown unprotected on the mercy of the world, or that the friend who had been to him as a brother was fighting a hard battle with life, and learning for the first time the hardships and difficulties that are to genius as the rein to the fiery steed, who longs for the freedom of the desert.

So the months drifted by, the seasons came and went, and the first year of his life in Germany came to an end. Buried in that quaint, world-forgotten town whither he had gone, the time passed swiftly and imperceptibly along by reason of its very monotony. He lived with his master still, and the fair, gentle German maiden to whom he turned for sympathy, or encouragement in his hours of despair was to him as a sister in this new home. He grew to love it for its very simplicity and quiet, its calm, unbroken rest.

Such a quaint, dreamy little place it was, yet beautiful withal, for it was shut in by great forests of pine, and dark purple mountains, stretching up their heads to catch the first rays of sunrise or the hazy cloud-mists of the evening. There were dark woods, too, and rushing torrents, and little babbling, shadowy brooks. There was much beauty, though of a wild and sometimes gloomy nature, but its peace and its loneliness suited Albert well, and he was content to live there, and work there, though his master often counselled him to seek other towns and fairer cities, where he might have a better chance of success. But Albert always answered him,—

“What did they do for you?” And the old man, knowing that his life had been wasted in them to no purpose, urged his wishes no longer on the pupil he loved as a son, because

in him he saw his own youth reproduced and his own dreams revived.

So the young artist lived with them, and became to the old man as a son, to the young girl as a hero; and her guileless heart weaved all pure and noble fancies about him and his future, and her life found joy and gladness in his confidence. Hitherto her father had been all in all to her; now a new interest had crept into her heart; and when the old man praised and encouraged the gifted intelligence of his pupil, she listened with a fervour of belief and a glow of sympathy which Albert scarcely noticed.

His master's praises were dearer to him than any other, because he knew they must be deserved ere ever they would be given. But he never knew that the old man, even amidst his encouraging prophecies, trembled for the future of the young artist before him; that from the teaching of his own experience, he knew the world would be a cruel taskmaster for his pure hopes, his ardent fancies; that the keen sting of his own disappointments pierced him afresh, and his own failure saddened him again when in his pupil's works he recognised a genius grand beyond all words, and great beyond all praise; yet, because of that very grandeur and that very greatness, incomprehensible to the age he lived in.

The master remembered his own past when he thought of his pupil's future. He remembered a time when, with youth's divine dreams, and youth's blind belief in the impossible, he had thought to vanquish the world at a touch, and to teach it mightier lessons of a newer, loftier faith. He remembered the bitter combat *his* life had been; for he could only look back now on a battle-field strewn with dead hopes, and stricken powers, and vanquished ambitions. He thought of all that he had sought and the world had denied, till in very weariness and despair he had sickened of the strife and renounced fame for ever, turning his face resolutely away from the delusive promises of youth, and bringing down to the stern and sober level of real life the inborn inspirations of his heart and soul.

Does the world ever give any other reward but thanklessness and neglect to those who dream of teaching it purer, nobler truths than any it has yet learnt, and who hold only in one hand genius—in the other poverty and belief?

CHAPTER IV.

A HOPE.

“What wisdom more, what better life
Than pleaseth God to send ;
What worldly goods, what longer use
Than pleaseth God to lend ? ”

“WHAT do you think of it, Herr Professor ? ”

Albert laid his hand on the old man's shoulder as he ceased playing, and came forward in the glow of the firelight. His master had not spoken either praise or criticism yet, and the young man had grown weary of the long silence which had followed his remark to Bertha Eltermein.

“What do you think of it ? ” he repeated. “The score is finished at last ; half a year's hard labour in it too ! What are its merits or its chances, do you suppose ? ”

The professor raised his head from its drooping attitude, and gazed proudly up at the face before him. How fair and young and spiritual it looked in the gleam of the flames, in the semi-obscurity of the shadowy, quaint old room !

“It has but one fault,” he said gently, “it is too spiritual. It appeals to the few, not to the many. It passes by all claims to popularity. Music can have no greater fault in the present day. Were your name already famous, its beauty and originality, its exquisite pathos and poetic thought would give you all the triumph you desire ; as it is, you are unknown, and you choose this work to carry your name to the world. The envious will sneer at it ; the panderers to popular taste and popular error will deny that it has any merit ; publishers will be shy of introducing it, because it differs in many respects from the acknowledged and universally-accepted standard of the music the public usually hear. I fear it will be a hard struggle ere you can obtain a hearing for it. Perhaps if you take it to Leipzig you may have a chance. I have a friend at the Conservatoire who may help you, for the sake of some slight service I rendered him in the past. Will you try ? ”

“If you think I have a chance, certainly,” said Albert, looking lovingly at the closely-written pages of his symphony, and turning over the leaves with the gentle, reverent touch of an author as he sees his work completed, and knows how much depends on its success.

“It differs widely from the ordinary standard,” continued the

professor. "It will be received with distrust, and meet with more difficulty than either you anticipate or it deserves. Men would rather drag art down to the level of their own understanding than educate themselves to meet its requirements. Think you they will turn their eyes from earth, their ears from the cry of their own wants and necessities to listen even to the music of the spheres! now, too, when the melody they love best is the melody of gold; the only gods they care to worship, the twin divinities of wealth and pleasure."

He ceased speaking, and the young, earnest face of the artist grew troubled at his words.

"What can I do?" he said sadly, "I cannot write otherwise than I feel. God has given me genius. How can I be false to *that*?"

It was the old cry of despair wrung from the bitterness of a man's heart when he feels the genius within appeal in vain to the world without, when he knows it may beat its wings against the prison bars of circumstances, and beat them in vain, while its only recompense is defeat, and its only fame—forgetfulness.

"True; that is what we all say," answered the old man gravely. "We cannot be false to *that*. No! but it were a thousand times better if we could; better for us here, at all events, while life clamours for support, and the body's hunger is keener and sharper than the soul's. Ah! *mein Schüler*, it is one of the toughest problems we have to solve, this sacrifice of ease for hardships, wealth for want, life for fame, which genius demands when, as you say, we cannot be *false* to it. It is a wisdom so unworldly that the world calls it foolishness. It looks to men's eyes as a vain pursuit after shadows, while all the substance and goodness of life are passed by in scorn!"

A silence fell upon them after those words, and Bertha Eltermein, looking up from her shadowy corner at the grave young face she had grown to love so well, saw how sad and pale it looked now, and how soon discouragement had robbed it of all its glow and fervour. Her heart went out to him in a great throb of tenderness and pity.

"After writing such music as *that*," she said softly, "you have surely little to fear. Have faith in yourself, Herr Albert, and that will compel others to believe in you. My claim to men's wonder and to men's praise would never give *me* distrust of my own power to enforce it?"

"Because you are a woman, Fraulein Bertha, and women reason and feel so differently to men," said Albert sadly. "Faith in myself is a thing I am sadly deficient in. I long to win fame; I long to achieve great things, and leave a mark in the world ere I bid

farewell to it. I often think my life will not be a long one, and therefore it is I feel the craving to achieve something ere it is over that will prove it has not been quite idle or purposeless."

The girl glanced quickly up at him, while a cold breath of fear swept over her heart—a fear new to her in her happy, placid life. It had never occurred to her that a time might come when things would change, when Albert Hoffmann would be with them no longer, and all the dreamy content and simple peace of her home life now would be altered entirely by the loss of one of its members. That he might go forth into the world and fight its battles for himself was probable, but surely he would always return to the shelter of that quiet roof where his first efforts had been made; he would always come to them for sympathy and rest. Of that she had no doubt, but these words opened a new fear before her, and she shuddered away from its chilling touch, as if a cold hand had been laid upon her own.

"Bertha does not understand these matters, does she, Albert?" said the professor, breaking the silence that had followed his pupil's words. "It is very easy to talk of compelling the world to believe in us; it is a very different matter to *make* it do so. Only those who have tried the experiment know the difficulty. That you long for fame and work for it I know. But as Bertha says, you lack courage and confidence, and that will render the struggle a hard and a dispiriting one for you. Yet my advice is, 'Go out in the world. Measure your own merits with those of other men, but never lower the standard you have set yourself, however hard it is to keep up to it.' All true genius should exalt by its teachings, not debase itself to the ordinary level which men are content to believe perfect, because it saves them the trouble of thinking out anything new and strange, and therefore incomprehensible.

"That is what I wish to do," said Albert eagerly. "It is easy enough to follow in the same paths when others have smoothed the way and explained the landmarks. My ideas are different, and when I give the rein to fancy and imagination, I cannot but see my music is different to other music. Whether better or worse, it is not for me to say. I only write as I feel."

"That is best," said his master approvingly. "Originality is a gift in itself, and one that you possess in an extraordinary degree. I told you when you first came to me I could teach you but little. I may say now I have taught you all I can; the rest remains for you to do. Men who have genius like yourself should never rest content with obscurity. It is a wrong done to themselves, to the world, and to the gift within their souls. They should not let the world pass by and not strive to make their voice heard in it—to plant the seeds from which a future

harvest of good may spring, while they tread life's highway with their fellow-men. All things of beauty, of wisdom, and of greatness leave the world better, purer, nobler for the lessons they teach ; for genius never dies, it makes itself heard in men's lives, it speaks in men's tongues, it rises from the ashes of the past and gains new life in the future !”

Then the old man turned to gaze meditatively in the fire-depths again, and Bertha rose and put aside her work, and lighted the candles on the table, and drew the curtains over the window, and once more the young artist turned to his score, ever and anon striking some soft, rich chords from the keys before him, while the old glory and the old delight flushed his face and lit his eyes as they alone had power to do now.

For Albert had never forgotten his dreams of love in the past, and their pain and their longing could only be lulled to rest by the exercise of a stronger power—the power of a genius God had bestowed, and his art had consecrated to itself. He lived only for that now. Failure and obscurity he dreaded only because of that inward, restless fever which made him long to teach others all that he had himself learnt. He only asked of the world—belief, and of the future—fame.

He passed by the thought of wealth in scorn ; it was not gold for which he laboured ; it was only for such honour as would make his name live in men's memories and gladden men's hearts so that they could never let it die out in forgetfulness, even if they would.

“What have you done with your opera ?” asked his master suddenly, interrupting the soft, slow harmonies which sounded ever and anon in the silence of the room.

“I have sent it to Paris,” said Albert, turning towards him as he spoke. “The director of one of the musical societies there has hopes of having it produced at one of the theatres. He is a man of great influence I know. You remember I told you I had the opera performed once at Renonçeux. I engaged an orchestra, and this gentleman was the conductor. He liked the opera so much that he wished me to produce it in Paris. However, I could not make up my mind about it then ; and afterwards—” he hesitated a moment—“afterwards so many things happened, and I came to Germany, and for a time forgot all about it. However, I corrected and improved it during the winter, and now this Monsieur L'Estrange has it. He says I can expect no payment, even if it is performed, unless it is an extraordinary success.”

“And you agreed to these terms ?”

“Certainly. What else could I do ? Any terms for a hearing just at first, Herr Professor. I have no name—yet.”

“Ah, I know that cry of old,” said his master sadly. “No

name, no name—always that with these vampires who live on our brains and turn our labours to their own ends and purposes ! No name ! It is the millstone they hang round our necks, the weight with which they crush out all the hope and gladness of our lives. No name, lieber Gott ! and how are we to get it, while every man's mind is busy with schemes for his own ends and purposes, and we, unless we bring something to further and assist those schemes, may starve in a garret or die in a gutter !”

“Dear father !” said Bertha soothingly, as she crossed over to the old man and took his shaking hands tenderly in her own, “do not excite yourself so. Things have gone hard with you, I know, but still you often tell me you are content with life as it is.”

“So I am, so I am, *Liebchen*,” he answered her tenderly. “I have thee, and thou art my great comfort, Bertha. But I grieve for Albert sorely when I see how hard a struggle lies before him—when I think that he too may have to slake his thirst for fame in the bitter waters of disappointment ; though Heaven grant him a better fate ! He deserves it !”

“Or else save me from witnessing it !” cried Albert impetuously. “I don't care for length of years if my heart is to be crushed and saddened by weary failures and unattainable longings. The birds do not sing in the darkness. The flowers do not bloom in the desert. Even so the greatest genius cannot live without hope, nor can I deem my life worth living, without success.”

“Hush !” said the old man gravely. “Are the gifts of God to be only valued by the reward they bring ? Is the nature within you only so far precious in respect to the hopes realized, the ambitions achieved ? Is the world our only judge, or even our best ? Ah, Albert, you are young and I am old, and all that you feel I felt once, when my spirit rebelled against the harsh teachings of the world, even as yours rebels now. Lieber Gott ! the world has so many mysteries we cannot fathom, so many lessons it well-nigh breaks our hearts to learn. Think of the years I have lived, and in them all I have only lost hope and won—content. One day I shall know why it was. I can only wait—I can only wait !”

“You teach me a noble lesson—a lesson of endurance and of faith,” said Albert gently. “God give me patience and strength to learn it as you have done !”

“It seems strange to you now,” said the old man gently. “Yes, for you are young, and youth frets itself to death, like a caged bird, while it beats its wings against the prison-bars of the world's neglect ; while it sings on and on, and finds no listener to its song. The air blows softly by that cage, and the sun shines

on it, yet the captive within heeds neither one nor other. It asks for freedom only, and what freedom is to the young, *success* is to genius. It paves the way for all fair things beyond. It is life, and air, and sunshine. Ah, Albert, it is no new thing to suffer all that you suffer. I know it in my own experience, hundreds know it, and will know it again in theirs. While the world exists such things as have been *will be*. The wonder of it all is that we deem each individual experience some new, strange thing which has fallen upon us alone. Alas! could the dead speak they would but tell the same tale to the living, as the living would tell the dead. Life has not changed one whit from what it was in the beginning of the world, only the difficulty is—to believe it!”

And the old man sighed for his past, and the young man sighed for his future, and a silence fell on both as they thought of the great problem life had almost solved for one, and was only opening to the other.

BOOK V.

CHAPTER I.

VENICE.

“ So o’er the lagoon
We glided ; and from that funereal bark
I lean’d and saw the city, and did mark
How from their many isles in evening’s gleam
Its temples and its palaces did seem
Like fabrics of enchantment piled to heaven ! ”

ERE the month’s probation was over, which Raoul de Verdreuil had set his strange secretary, he had every reason to congratulate himself on the choice he had made.

The man was intelligent, well-informed, trustworthy, but above all he had for his employer that passionate devotion which springs to life in a southern nature with a rapidity and force that colder and less effusive minds cannot understand, and are often apt to distrust. His services to Raoul were a labour of love, and his abilities were of no common order. Added to this he had a knowledge of languages which far exceeded Raoul’s own. German, Russian, French, Italian, Dutch, and English were all familiar to him, and the more Raoul saw and studied his varied acquirements, the more he marvelled at the low depths of infamy to which he had fallen ere he rescued and gave him back to a new and better life. Humanity is rarely entirely bad ; there are few, if any, living creatures who are too hopelessly depraved to be reclaimed, if only any one would strive to reclaim them—if only a kind voice, a helping hand, could reach them in the darkness of their moral degradation, and draw them back from the depths of sin and misery while yet they are sinking therein.

Raoul de Verdreuil's own life had known hours of madness and despair—times when he rushed wildly and recklessly into folly and forgetfulness, only because existence seemed a curse, a bondage of the body from which the soul longed to free itself. Yet there was something within him which calamity could not conquer. Though love and honour had been wrenched from him by treachery, the dignity of manhood remained. He would not—nay, he could not—kill the nobler powers of mind and intelligence ; and when the darkness and blackness of his first rage and disappointment had passed away, he resolutely set himself to work out new objects in life, which might recompense him in some degree for all he had lost. He was not a man to sit idly down and waste his time in vain regrets and repinings ; but, all the same, the deep, undying hatred he bore to the woman who had wronged him lived and took deeper root in his heart as time went on. He never forgot her act, and he never forgot the vengeance he had sworn on her ; and, though he bore himself proudly and coldly as ever to the eyes of the world, the fires of fierce and remorseless passion slumbered in his heart, ready to burst forth in all their fury the moment that opportunity applied the match.

Yet to others Raoul showed a noble charity and a boundless compassion few credited him with possessing. When need and wrong and oppression met him in the world, his sympathy was ever ready, his help ever quickest and surest. It seemed almost as if he set himself this task as a penance for his own dark, evil thoughts—as if, in lightening the sorrows of others, he atoned to his own heart for its unworthy and oftentimes merciless purpose ; for revenge is a cruel and dastardly passion, and one that works as much ruin in the lives of those who plan as those who suffer from it.

He had lost much : but it was not the loss so much as the treachery which had given the loss to him, that he wished to avenge. Treachery was to him a sin unpardonable, because, in his own lofty soul, it could never find dwelling-place for a moment ; and when he thought of all it had done for him, of the shame and the loss it had brought him amidst the glow and fervour of his hopes, he said to himself that all worth living for now, was to pay it back in measure deep and full to the traitress who had wronged him.

But of all he had rescued in the world around him, none had appealed to him so strongly as the man who from a murderer had become a faithful slave, a devoted and most unselfish friend. Raoul knew that a dark mystery was coiled about his heart ; but he never questioned its cause, for he knew that confidence is valueless unless given of its own free-will.

That this man's life had been a chequered one was evident. A gamester's is ever a life of strange contrasts, of rapid changes; now in sunshine, now in darkness; one day rich, successful, glorious; the next reckless, hopeless, desperate. But the man was faithful to his word. For one whole year he dwelt with Raoul de Verdreuil, and in that time he never gave him the slightest cause to distrust his promises. The remorse he felt for his attempt on the life of his benefactor never left him, and it purified and ennobled him, so that Raoul, watchful and carefully observant of his actions, had never once repented of a generosity which to the eyes of the world would have seemed an outburst of Quixotic madness, but which had saved a human soul from eternal death—the death in life of all that is pure and great within it—which, instead of a blasphemous, venomous, degraded outcast, showed a man alive to his own responsibilities once more, and able and willing to bear them—a truer generosity than any charity gives to those whose bodies it rescues, whose souls it forgets.

One night, just a year after Raoul had met his assassin in the ruined solitude of the Forum at Rome, he was alone with him in the charmed and silent calm of a night in Venice.

They were drifting slowly along beneath the marble walls, the shadowy arches, the mighty palaces, of that strange, weird, ghostly city, whose very life is still and wonderful and awestruck, as though some magician's spell enclosed it, which none can remove. In the darkness of the night there was no sound audible save the beat of the oars in the water, or the soft, low cry of a distant gondolier. The white gleam of the moonlight fell on dark marble piles, on quaint carvings, on mosaic-lined walls—on all the massive, ancient beauty of past centuries, where, in those sea-bathed palaces, oligarchy had kept high state, and the Bride of the Adriatic had once held her nuptial feast.

Raoul leaned back against the cushions of his gondola, and his thoughts drifted far away to those days of splendour and delight when the Adriatic had been crowded with returning fleets flushed with victory and sated with triumph—when the palaces, towering above that endless flow of gliding waters, had been filled with the pageantry and glory of success—when women's beauty and reveller's mirth had filled the silence that now seemed eternal, and the glow and marvel of colour and loveliness had made the Venice of the past so different from the Venice of the present.

Suddenly a voice startled him. He saw the dark, enthusiastic face of the Italian gazing at him in the moonlit stillness of the summer night; it was strangely stirred and moved.

"Signor!" he said softly, "it is a year-to-day since I first came to you—a whole year—and you have not questioned me once of that life you saved. I promised you once, long ago, that if a day ever came when I could tell you my story I would do so. In a place, in a night like this, my youth, my hopes, my dreams of love come back to me again. If you care to listen, I will tell you how I Carlo Viotti became a gambler and an assassin."

"Are you sure it does not pain you to rake up the ashes of the past? Tell me nothing that distresses you," said Raoul gently.

He, too, was saddened and softened by the mysterious hush, the tranquil, ethereal beauty of the Venetian night. He, too, felt that his years seemed cold, and passionless, and heavy-laden, as he floated over the mystic depths of those calm lagunes. In such a night men's hearts are attuned to softer passions, to sweeter thoughts, than ambition brings, or the world bestows. In such a night Raoul felt that the earth would have been without shadow for him could *one* face shine out of the darkness around—could the light of a woman's eyes and the touch of a woman's lips make life a paradise such as only visited him in dreams.

And yet, while such thoughts thrilled him with their sweetness, and wrapped him in their joy, his vengeance was to meet him face to face at last!

CHAPTER II.

A TALE OF THE PAST.

"Oh! she was fair! Her nature once all spring,
And deadly beauty, like a maiden-sword,
Strikingly beautiful! I see her now."

CARLO VIOTTI drew nearer to Raoul as he began his tale, and the soft, liquid Italian which flowed from his lips seemed to suit well the dreamy, shadowy beauty of the scene, while they floated ghost-like over the gliding waters of the canal, and the fragrance of the sea-wafted air came stealing through the silence of the night.

There was a lulling charm in the air around—a mysterious calm in the depths of the brooding shadows—and Raoul leant back with a sigh of regret for the mournful memories awakened,

for the light and the peace of happy years that now might never visit him. And while the measured beat of the oars made a music of their own, while afar off sounded the soft sweet melody of a gondolier's song—while the hush and fragrance of the night closed them in its deep enfolding shadows, the story of his life was told by the man he had rescued to Raoul de Verdreuil.

"Years ago," he began, "when I was but a boy, I lived in Napoule. You know Napoule, signor? No? Ah, a fair place, well known throughout all Provence. It lies in the shade of palms and orange-groves. Only a little place, but beautiful exceedingly with ever-blooming roses and luscious grapes, and fields of olives and vineyards. My parents went to live there when I was very young; and in a place so small, where every one knew his neighbours' business and his neighbours' history, you may be sure gossip and scandal abounded. Well, there was an old woman who lived far up among the vinehills of Napoule, and who enjoyed but an ill reputation among the people. No one knew how she lived or what she did, and yet there was no stint or want in her house, nor any sign of poverty about her. All sorts of rumours and histories were invented for her, but no one really knew anything of her affairs. One day a story went through the village that at midnight a carriage had driven up to her house, and a tall man, wrapped up in a long fur cloak, had got out of it with something like a bundle in his arms. However this may be, it was certain enough that from that time a child was heard and seen about the cottage—a little fairy-like, beautiful creature, with hair like gold-dust, and soft dark eyes, and lips like carnation-buds. People wondered who the child was and whence it came, but the woman never betrayed its origin by word or look, and the mystery was never solved. As the child grew up she was sent to a convent among the hills to be educated. The rumour was that she was herself to take the veil; but, looking at the lovely face and exquisite form, it was impossible to believe the girl would ever sacrifice her beauty, and bury it in the seclusion of such a life as that of a nun. I was about nineteen, and she fifteen or thereabouts, when I first summoned courage to speak to her. It was hard ever to get word or speech of her, for the old woman watched her jealously, and took her every day to the convent herself. No one was ever admitted to the lonely house on the hill-side, and there was a mystery about the girl which gave additional charm to her loveliness, and made many watch and wait for opportunity to speak to her. None succeeded, however. She was too well guarded for that; but one day I, excited by curiosity, as many of my friends and neighbours had been, went up to the convent

and loitered about the garden, just outside the walls, in hopes of seeing this wonderful beauty. Ere long I heard a voice singing on the other side of the wall. I listened ; it was very low and sweet ; a voice which thrilled and stirred my heart as nothing had ever done before. I looked around. Near by grew a tall tree with great overhanging boughs. A moment, and I had swung myself up to the level of the convent walls, actuated only by an impulse to see for myself the sweet-voiced singer, whose voice had a power so great. I crept along the outstretched boughs ; before me were the convent gardens, and beneath me, lying on the broad, tufted grasses and ferns, with the shadows of the branching trees above her head, and her hair gleaming like gold in the sunlight, was the girl whom I longed to see—the mysterious creature whom some said was a witch-child sent for no good purpose to our peaceful village, and whose spells had already worked mischief in the good folks' homes.

I looked at her silently—long. Anything so beautiful I had never seen or imagined.

"I looked at her till my heart went out to her in that look—till my very life and soul seemed to leave me and centre itself in that girlish loveliness, that divine form. She saw me at last. She neither screamed nor moved, nor appeared startled. Probably the monotony of her life had long wearied her, and she was glad of any change or any novelty. She spoke to me very softly. She bade me be careful I was not perceived ; but it was the noon-hour, and the good sisters were all in the convent, and she was free for an hour to roam about the gardens. So much she told me, and that this was the quietest and most unfrequented nook in all the gardens, and we were not likely to be disturbed. I believe she bewitched me from that moment. I had neither thought nor wish but of her. Day and night her face haunted me. Again and again I sought her at the same hour, in the same place, growing bolder as time went on, and even venturing to enter the sacred precincts of the convent gardens myself. She told me how she hated the restraint of her life—the quiet monotony—the strict seclusion. As time went on, she was obliged to live at the convent altogether, and the good nuns said it would soon be her privilege to take the veil. Then it was that the truth flashed upon me—I loved her ! To lose her—to see her given up to such a life—a life worse than death itself—was torture unendurable. I lost all self-command, and in one of our meetings I told her of my love. She said if only I would rescue and take her away from this life, she would be mine. Mine ! What transports of enthusiasm, what idolatry of madness, what depths of bliss that word held for me then ! To win her I would have sacrificed anything, everything,

and to win her I set myself the work of rescue and of sacrilege."

He paused. The light of that old madness gathered in his eyes; the memories of that old dead, unforgotten time, when the sorcery and sweetness of love had been his, kindled in his heart. His voice grew deeper, more passionate, as it thrilled out in the stillness of the night, with the sweetest remembrances his youth had held.

"I loved her; oh, God! how I loved her! I thought I had outlived all softness of that memory, but its power can move me still. She was so beautiful! I deemed her so perfect, and yet all wrong and guilt and madness of my past life I owe to her. Almost I doubt whether it is hate or love I feel when I think of her as she was then, in that sweet golden summer-time of my youth, when my heart's whole worship was laid at her feet, and I revered her as the one pure, perfect thing the world contained.

"While I planned and thought on scheme after scheme, the very opportunity I sought came to me. My father was a man well off, with the finest estate in all Napoule, and I was his only son. He resolved I should not spend all my days in the quiet and the solitude of this little dreaming village. I must see the world; I must be great and famous; and for this purpose he suddenly resolved to send me to a rich merchant's house in Paris. It was a good opening, he said, and one that promised speedy advancement and much wealth in time to come. This news timed in well with my schemes. No one suspected I even knew the fair novitiate at the convent and everything seemed to happen just as I wished. The day before that determined upon for her to take the vows of a nun, I was to leave Napoule. I arranged with her that I should provide a disguise for her, that she was to flee the day before I left, and we could meet half way to Paris, so that no one could suspect us of having gone away together. She agreed readily to everything I wished, and all promised well for the success of our plans.

"The day came; Blanche left the convent by means of a ladder which I provided. There was no alarm given, and not till the next morning did the news of her flight spread to the village. There was no trace of her to be found. She had stained her fair skin, and hidden her hair under a sailor's cap, and, dressed as a fisher-boy, had left the village in a small sailing-vessel the night before. Gold had bribed the captain to take his strange passenger; gold paved the way for all other exigencies of her travels. She was safe and unsuspected like myself. From the day she left the convent none heard of her again. At the place appointed I met her, and we were married by a priest

ere we went on to Paris. The ceremony took place in a little out-of-the-way village ; no questions were asked ; gold silenced all suspicions, and we were safely wedded.

"When I reached Paris I took rooms for us both in one of the quietest and least-frequented parts of the city. The merchant to whom I was to go was a rich man, and in his office I began my life of independence and freedom. He noticed my assiduity and steadiness, and it pleased him. I had always a great gift for languages, and I studied them and mastered them so well, that he found me of great use as a translator to his firm. He promoted me more rapidly than I expected, and I began to make money for myself. I told no one I was married, save a fellow-clerk with whom I formed an acquaintanceship, which soon ripened into friendship. He was older than myself ; clever—well educated—of good birth. I liked his companionship, and, as time went on, I took him to my home, and introduced him to my wife. She had been well content with her new life. She loved the gay, bright, beautiful city, and I took her everywhere I could, and gave her such pleasures and enjoyments as were possible. But after a time she began to complain of the dulness of our life. She wanted friends—constant change and excitement. This I could not give her ; of her own sex I knew none ; of mine I never cared to know many, save and except this one friend, whom I deemed a man of honour. I always thought my wife loved me as fully and passionately as I loved her. I lived still in a paradise of belief, and every thought and hope of my heart centred in and around her. For her I worked and laboured ; for her I strove for wealth and honour ; for *her* all temptations of the new and dazzling life of a city so full of allurements as Paris were passed by in scorn. I told none of my family or friends of my marriage at her earnest wish. It was a secret shared only by the one friend admitted to our home.

"At last it dawned upon me that this man had other means and other resources besides the income he derived from his business. He lived in splendid rooms ; he rode the finest horses ; he mingled with some of the wealthiest society in Paris. How did he do it ? His income was not very much more than mine, I knew, and it puzzled me often to discover what other resources he possessed.

"At last he told me himself. The secret was no mystery after all. He was a gambler. In all chances he was successful to a marvel. I have seen him win a fortune in one night. He laughed at my horror when first he confessed his secret to me, and by little and little drew me on, first to hear, then to watch, then to try for myself the mysteries of cards, the fatal temptings of the dice-box. Fortune smiled on me, and chance deluded me.

A Tale of the Past.

I rose to wealth in one dizzy moment of success. Then my wife seemed at last content. We had excitement, gaiety, pleasure enough. Paris was like my beautiful love, I often thought—gay, volatile, capricious, ardent—a child in its thoughtlessness and its mirth—an empress in its sovereignty and witchery. She loved her new life, and I was happy in her happiness. But the life and the excitement were not good for me. I neglected my business. I hazarded more and more on the chances of the gaming-table. I lost and won; I won and lost. I had vast wealth one day—the next I woke to beggary and ruin. I had nothing—absolutely nothing—not one coin left of all the many I had wasted and lavished in folly and in chance. I was a beggar!”

He paused. The dark shadows of the past—the misery and recklessness of that mad time—swept over him, and Raoul’s voice came pityingly through the silence,—

“Tell me no more if it pains you.”

“It is over now,” he answered him with a strange tremor in his voice. “What remains to tell is not much. The discovery of my ruin was a shock which sobered me. I looked on the madness of the past months. I resolved to eschew their vile temptations for ever. With penitence and shame I sought my girl-wife. I told her of the loss, the ruin I had brought on us both. She listened, not as I expected, with upbraidings and reproaches, but with pity and gentleness. Then all my heart went out to her in tenfold power and worship. I loved her as I had never loved her yet. Then while still her words echoed in my ears, and her smiles soothed my troubles, and my heart rejoiced in the one great treasure that neither good nor evil fortune could take from it, she—the woman I loved and trusted above all in the earth—*she* fled from me with the man who had tempted me to my ruin! Even while she soothed and comforted me, her plans had been laid. She left me to my poverty and shame, as remorselessly as if no tie had bound us. I lost wealth, love, honour, in one moment!

“You know how the world takes these things; but I was young then, and maddened and desolate. I had loved this woman so utterly, and she—was vile and worthless. Does the world hold a greater curse for a man’s trust than that?”

“I believe I was mad when this came home to me. I know not what I did. The very chain of reason seemed to snap like a feeble thread. The months drifted by; I knew nothing of them. The shame of my misery and degradation burnt itself into my brain. Of life I asked nothing save forgetfulness or death!

“But let me hasten on. I will draw the veil over years

hateful and poisonous and sin-steeped ; for I verily believe I was mad with very despair, with very recklessness. Years had passed ; their guilt was consuming every purer and higher instinct of my nature, when suddenly I heard that she was dead. A message came to me in a far-off land, whither I had gone. How she knew or traced me thither I cannot tell ; but with the thought of her death I forgot her sin, and I longed to look upon her face again. Of her life since she left me I knew nothing—I could guess enough ; but I thought of her youth and her loveliness ; I thought of the girl-recluse in the solitude of her convent. I thought of the fair young wife, who had made my life a brief paradise of bliss, and I went to seek her in death.

“Capri was where I had heard from her ; to Capri I went. I wondered that she had gone thither, to so remote, so quiet a place ; but I had a madness, a longing to look on her again ; and I went to the beautiful little nook, with its face turned to Sicily, and its groves of orange and citrons, and the blue waters of its bay lined with fisherboats, and the tiny toy-like villas nestled amidst the leafy heights of its sea-girt rocks.”

Again he paused, and his head bent low, and his breath came fast and quick. Raoul did not speak ; he deemed it best that the story should be ended in his own way. In a few moments the man resumed it :—

“The villa whither I had been directed was that of the Contessa Lorenzo, a Florentine lady.”

Raoul started, and listened more eagerly.

“I sought admission, but had much difficulty in obtaining it. However, I firmly refused to go until I saw the contessa herself. She was a woman middle-aged, and with little beauty ; nor did I like either her manners or appearance. From her I learnt that—my wife—had lived with her for some months past ; that she had been ill, and delicate, and a constant invalid ; seeing no one, living in strict seclusion, and greatly distressed in mind about some one against whom she had committed a great and unpardonable sin. The contessa had used many efforts to find out who this was, and at last, shortly before she died, the news reached her of his whereabouts. The individual was myself ; the dying penitent my wife. I came too late to see her. She had been buried the day before. The contessa gave me a ring I recognised immediately as one I had bestowed on the woman who had wronged me, in the days of our love and trust. She directed me to the burying-ground, and then I took my leave of her and went my way. My vengeance was taken out of my hands. The guilty creature who had wrecked my life and broken my heart had gone to render up her account at

the judgment-seat above ; and I—I went forth, stricken, lonely, desolate, a wanderer on the face of the earth, which has worn no smile for me since that hour.

“ There is little else to tell, signor. When my senses came back to me, I seemed to have neither object nor ambition in life. I set myself to forget the misery within me ; to grind out my deadly pain as best I could. I sank lower and lower ; I grew more evil, more vile. I had neither faith in human honour nor in human love ; a life is soon lost then.” His voice grew softer as he continued :—“ In the grave of my buried years lies all the madness and the folly and the guilt from which your voice rescued and your pity saved me. If I am anything better now, I owe it only to you.”

“ And the name of the woman who wronged you thus ? ”

Raoul’s voice was hoarse and constrained, and his eyes burned with a strange, swift light of eagerness as they rested on the Italian.

“ Her name ? Have I not told you ? The name she went by in Napoule, the only name I heard of her having, was *Blanche Lecroix* ! ”

A cry, hoarse and strange, thrilled out in the silence. Raoul seized the arm of his companion.

“ Do you know what you say ? Are your temptress and my traitress one and the same ? You say she is dead. I know she is living—living ! Great heavens ! and *your wife* ! ”

The Italian gazed at him, in amazement too great for words.

“ Speak ! ” continued Raoul hoarsely. “ Is it true ? If so, my life is free again ! At last ! at last God sends me justice ! ”

“ Signor,” stammered the man, “ what is it you mean ? What moves you so ? You ask if my words are true ? As there is a heaven above me, yes ! But what have they to do with you ? How can she who is dead have ever done you harm ? ”

“ She is not dead ! ” said Raoul, speaking in a voice low and distinct ; “ she lives still. But a few years ago she became my father’s wife. She is now *Blanche de Verdreuil*, Countess of *Renonçaux*.”

“ It is false ; it cannot be ! ” cried Viotti, as in the agony of passion and disbelief he clenched his hands on the frail wood-work before him, while his frame quivered, and his eyes had a mute imploring anguish like that of a creature wounded unto death. “ I forgave her in her death ; I wept over her grave among the far-off hills of Capri. Do you say she has lived and deceived others all these years, enjoying wealth and honours and the world’s smiles, while I—no hunted criminal could be more utterly fallen than I was only a year ago ! ”

The anguish in his voice touched Raoul's heart more deeply than his words.

"I am sorry for you," he said softly. "I little thought our lives were so closely united by the evil deeds of one woman. But it is true nevertheless. See, we are landing now ; come to my rooms ; I have proof enough to convince you of the truth of my words ere long."

The man rose to his feet like one stunned and bewildered by a great shock.

Mechanically he followed Raoul from the gondola, as its keel grated on the steps of the landing-place, and together they passed up the marble stairs to the place of his dwelling—a majestic, melancholy building, with lofty casements and many rooms, now lonely and unspeakably desolate.

In one of them Raoul paused, and motioned Viotti to be seated also. Then without further prelude or hesitation, he unfolded to the Italian the story of his own wrongs, and traced back incidents and proofs with sure, unerring hand, till the chain of evidence was complete—till the girl-recluse of the Napoule convent, the wife of Carlo Viotti, the fair, enchanting Countess of Renonçeux, were all proved to be one and the same person.

CHAPTER III.

SCORN OR RUE.

"How false is the fairest breast!
How little worth, if true!
And who would wish possess'd
What all must scorn or rue?"

WELL might Blanche de Verdreuil have trembled had she known the precipice on which she stood ; but as yet she was ignorant of her danger, and gave no thought to the future in her reckless enjoyment of the present. She basked in the sunshine of flattery ; she indulged in every wanton caprice and idle fancy that pleased her ; and the lavish splendour and courtly magnificence, which made up the whole sum of her existence, were themes of universal wonder and remark.

She lived in a world of magnificence and beauty, whose treasures gold had purchased for her. There were none to gain-

say her wishes, to deny her whims ; no language but that of flattery and subservience reached her ears ; no harsh truths or disagreeable counsels disturbed her mind. She had sold herself to pleasure and to sin, and she got the full price of her bargain. Not one sting of remorse ever pierced the silken folds of her robes, or sheathed its sharp point in the delicate bosom ; a nature steeped in selfishness, warped by sin and shame, what was there to soften or recall her to better impulses, or purer thoughts ? She lived for the world, and the world idolized her, and gave her all she asked of it. If she had hours of satiety, of weariness, or exhaustion, none knew of them, none suspected them. She laughed and jested, and defied all care, and her beauty was glorious as ever, and her power greater. For she had wealth and dignities now, and even the great ones of the world, who had once been shy of receiving her because of the mystery of her past, the uncertainty of her own birth and rank, now welcomed her as an equal, and sought her as a friend. Yes ! Blanche de Verdreuil had her fill of triumph, and she never thought that her sceptre might fall from her grasp—that her kingdom might crumble into dust and ashes at her feet.

When her year of widowhood had expired, and she had come to dazzle and delight the world of Paris with her wealth and her beauty, curious voices asked, and curious tongues spoke of Vivienne St. Maurice, her beautiful ward ; and by little and little the questioners heard a strange tale of the fair girl, whose beauty had startled and bewitched them all for one whole season. The rumour went that she had fled stealthily and secretly from her guardian's house with a young Italian singer, and, whether true or not, the world could not stop to question or cavil at it. She was gone : that was all they could tell, and all they cared for at present.

So Blanche reigned without a rival, and triumphed without an effort, and, if remembrance ever came to her, it was in her solitude when none knew or could hear of it, and her kingdom of evil seemed to her only a kingdom of good.

It was spring-time in Paris, and fashion's reign had commenced once more. There were bright colours, and beautiful faces, and dainty equipages thronging the Bois de Boulogne. There were laughter and mirth and festivity in the air, and rich foliage in the woods and pleasure-gardens, and a wealth of blossoms in balconies and windows. The reign of pleasure had commenced once more and the devotees of fashion were thronging to its court.

Among the costly equipages, as in the time when Vivienne had first beheld the glories of Parisian life, came that of Blanche de Verdreuil—only more costly, more splendid than of yore, with

its prancing horses, its gorgeous liveries, its crested panels, and its beautiful occupant leaning back amongst the cushions with the languor and dignity of an empress. A crowd was around—a mixed and heterogeneous multitude of all ranks and grades of life, for it was a fête-day in Paris.

As her carriage was stopped for a moment in its progress, her eyes swept negligently over the faces around. She saw a man among them whose gaze was fastened on her with a look which fascinated her, which compelled her eyes to meet it.

Slowly her face blanched to the ashy hues of sickening terror; she gazed as one might gaze on the dead new risen from the grave where it has been laid to rest. The smiles died on her lips, the light faded from her eyes; Blanche de Verdreuil looked like the ghost of the bright, beautiful creature she had been only a moment before.

Then the carriage dashed on: the face she had seen was lost amongst the crowd. Life and thought and memory came back to her. But her white lips shook, and she muttered to herself, "The game is played out now; I am lost!"

Once—twice the Countess de Verdreuil's carriage made the circuit of the Bois. She smiled and bowed and jested, light-hearted as ever to all appearance. None could read the agony she suffered, the tortures she endured; for a great horror enfolded her, and all peace was over for evermore. Her life would be branded with shame; the world she had fooled so successfully would soon know her as she was—her dignities, her possessions might all be wrenched from her by a single word. The future would be accursed from this day forward.

She touched the check-string of her carriage and ordered it back to her hotel. And still, in her passage through the bright streets and fashionable thoroughfares, she was met and recognized, and gave greetings in return, and none knew that the anguish and terror within her heart were so intolerable that she could have screamed out in her fear and horror of what was to come. No murderer pursued by the ghost of his victim could have known a worse horror and shuddered with a deeper fear than she did.

Trembling, heart-sick, desperate, she reached the shelter of her splendid home, and fled to the solitude of her room.

What should she do?

Plans, wild, vague, and confused, rushed through her brain—some dismissed immediately, others pondered, and one at last decided upon.

With lightning swiftness her orders were given and carried out. If all wondered, none dared to disobey.

Ere nightfall the Countess de Verdreuil had left Paris and returned to Rononçeux.

CHAPTER IV.

FAR WORSE THAN ANY DEATH.

"A devil rises in my heart
Far worse than any death to me."

Tennyson.

"WAS I not right?"

The question was put to Carlo Viotti by Raoul, as they met again after a brief absence. The Italian, still doubting that his wife lived, that she could be identical with the woman who had wronged his benefactor, had gone to Paris for the sole reason of convincing himself of the truth. He had but just returned from his journey. He had seen the face of his traitress: he had seen her in her sovereignty of beauty and triumph and wealth. He knew her again; he knew, too, that she had duped and cheated him for her own ends. She wished him to believe her dead in order that she might be free to marry again without the dread of discovery. She had trusted to chance to befriend her, and hitherto she had been safe. He never for one moment had doubted the fact of her death from the time her message reached him, and her ring had been given to him; and even Raoul's proofs had not been sufficient to shake that belief, till under the green aisles and rich foliage of the Bois de Boulogne he had seen her throned in the splendour and clothed with the honours she had won by treachery and deceit.

It was enough: he had seen her face again. He needed nothing more yet. He returned to Raoul de Verdreuil, where he awaited him in the Austrian capital, whither his official calling had required his presence—returned, ready now to bring forward all his proofs and hold up to the scorn of the world she had cheated so long, the woman who had wronged him.

Raoul de Verdreuil knew that Blanche would not give up easily all she had gained. The proofs of her marriage must be forthcoming first, and after so long a lapse of time it would be no easy matter to obtain them. This task, however, Carlo Viotti set himself resolutely to achieve, and, having decided upon a plan of action to be followed out, he left Raoul and went on his search alone.

Blanche de Verdreuil need not have fled from Paris in such alarm. Her husband had no present intention of confronting her with her crime, or publishing her shame. Horror-struck, indignant, as he was at the thought of

his own great wrongs, it was for Raoul he felt the deepest pity. He had been to him as an angel of light sent to guide his erring steps to truth and rectitude once more ; on him he had lavished all the worship and devotion of his warm southern nature. For him he would have deemed no sacrifice too great, no service too hard ; and when he thought that the guilty wife, who had wrecked his own life and poisoned all his own trust in honour and faith, was also the traitress who had robbed and wronged his benefactor, his indignation and wrath knew no bounds. To hurl her from her eminence she had gained by treachery and kept by sin—this was the one thought in his mind now, and in his thirst for vengeance he forgot all the love he had once borne her. Retribution fired his heart and armed his hand ; and to that end and for that purpose he set himself to work out her destruction, forgetful of all else.

Of the tie that had once bound them, the love that had been to him as the dream of a new life, he never thought now. All pity, all compassion, was swallowed up by the wrath and indignation that filled his heart when he thought how he had been duped and cheated all these years past. He had wakened out of a fool's paradise, and then given himself up to despair, while she—she had laughed at her easy victory. She had fooled him only too effectually, and had given herself up to the pleasures of a new life ; she had spared none, she had denied herself no single thing all her life through, so that she might win enjoyment. She had forsaken all duty, had known neither loyalty to love nor respect of honour, and yet all that pleasure and wealth and gold could give had been hers. Such are the wages of sin !

All favours of chance and circumstance had served her well, and been used by her unsparingly. She had had no pity for youth, no remorse for wrong ; and yet she had triumphed so long—so long ! But the triumph was over now ; her reign was past and done with, and the very uncertainty of how or when the blow would fall upon her, made her life one of torture and agony unbearable.

Since the day her husband's face had met her eyes in the crowds of Paris, Blanche de Verdreuil had known no peace or rest. She was haunted by a Nemesis terrible and relentless ; she was pursued by a phantom awful and yet intangible. She fled from Paris to Renonçeux to avoid it even for a day. Her whole thought now was to elude the danger that threatened her, and her only safety seemed in flight.

At Renonçeux she thought again of her plans. She was a woman of fertile invention, of many resources, and she taxed all her powers now in this the hour of her greatest peril. Sometimes she thought of buying the silence of this man. She had wealth

enough to tempt him, surely. At another time she resolved to deny his claims, to refute them boldly, and defy all proof and identification. What was there in common between the beautiful, haughty Countess de Verdreuil and the simple obscure novice at the convent at Napoule? Who could prove them to be the same? And, again, all evidences of her marriage must have been lost long since. The priest who had married them had been an old man; he must be dead by this time. If she took a high standing, if she refused to recognize or allow that this man was her husband, she might yet be safe. Her word would have more weight than his. Only she dreaded that Raoul might hear of this—Raoul, who was a foe at once relentless and cruel. He whom of all she had ever wronged she dreaded most, and who would expose her infamy to the world as mercilessly as she had robbed him of his heritage. If they should ever meet—she shuddered at the thought of the possibility, whose danger she never exaggerated, for Raoul's word and influence would carry a weight of truth with them which her husband alone could never possess; and no bribe, no pleading, would ever soften his heart or turn aside his purpose—that she knew.

Yet why should they meet? Why had that thought flashed so suddenly across her mind? She could not tell. She only felt a strange horror, a presentiment of punishment crushing all the enjoyment out of her life since *that face* had suddenly looked at her again—the face she had long forgotten, and which seemed to have risen from the dead to award her the justice she merited.

In all her egotism and callous indifference to the sufferings of others, she had ever been keenly alive to *fear* for herself, and this fear was now so sharp and torturing that it never left her night or day.

In the hush and solitude of the midnight hour she paced her room alone—her face blanched and haggard, her eyes wild and desperate. If she could have given the man whose name she had once borne—whose home she had once shared—to death now, she would have done it without a pang of regret! She knew no pity for others, only for herself. She had no remorse or regret for the wrongs she had dealt all her life through, but she had a fearful, terrible fear for her own safety. She had won so much, she dreaded inexpressibly to lose it all; and lose it she must, unless this evil could be averted. She pressed her hands to her throbbing temples, she cried out in her horror and her fear. In the darkness of the night she paced the room in all the costly apparelling, the glitter of gems with which she had ever delighted to adorn her beauty; and yet that beauty seemed stricken out utterly, and was cold, colourless, faded, as the hues

of a flower when the chill frosts of winter first touch its delicate loveliness. She had had no horror of her sin, but she had fear of its chastisement ; and the God she had forgotten and despised and outraged by her acts could be to her nothing in her hour of need but a just and terrible Avenger.

"What shall I do ? what can I do ?"

These words thrilled out on the solitude of that midnight hour, and no help, no answer came.

"My sins have come home to me at last !" she murmured despairingly. "All those I have wronged will glory in my downfall, will laugh at my shame. I broke faith with the living and the dead, and now—I have none to keep faith with me. The very fate to which I consigned Vivienne is now mine. I—the proud, the wealthy, the prosperous Countess of Renonçoux it am nothing but a beggar and imposter ! How shall I bear — ? Oh, Heaven ! how shall I bear it ?"

She threw herself on her couch and buried her face in her hands, while the horror and the helplessness of her fate enfolded her more closely as the hours sped on. She could think of nothing to avert it ; and yet to sit quiet and inactive, waiting for its approach, consumed by the dread and the fear of it each moment, each day she lived—the thought was unbearable ; she could not do it !

"I must act—act, or I shall go mad !" she cried despairingly, as she raised her white, agonized face, where the touch of this new and deadly fear had stamped itself. "I will not remain here. If they want me, at least they shall have work to find me. I will travel through the length and breadth of the world to avert the evil. It will give the world food for wonder, true—in the beginning of the season to fly like one possessed, to rush from place to place, as I must do ; but at least I shall be safe for a time ; and time is everything to me now. I may be able to decide upon some plan for the future, if only I can once force my brain to think calmly of all that lies before me in the present !"

The resolve once formed, she seemed to grow calmer. All was not yet lost. Of one thing she was certain ; her pursuer—for so she deemed her husband—had not the wealth and means she possessed. If she could only succeed in disguising her intentions by leaving no trace behind, he might never be able to find her. From city to city, from country to country, she would go ; she might baffle pursuit and elude detection even yet. As she thought of it, the light and colour stole back to her face, and she rose from her couch with the glitter of defiance instead of the previous haunting terror in her eyes.

She went swiftly over to her *escritoire*, and busied herself

with the papers and letters it contained ; some she destroyed, others she preserved, placing them in the various drawers and receptacles before her. "I must take with me only what is absolutely necessary," she said to herself ; "everything else must take its chance. I don't suppose I shall ever come back *here* again."

A half-sigh, a sigh of regret, escaped her. She had perilled so much, dared so much, to win this, and now she must leave it !

Yet safety was before all other considerations now, and that made her strong to resolve and strong to act even in such an emergency. As she opened one of the drawers before her to place some papers within, something contained in it attracted her attention. Involuntarily she drew it out and glanced at it. A little worn, shabby leather desk—that was all. She smiled as she looked at it.

"Vivienne should have had this," she said ; "it is the only legacy she has ever received, and she has left it behind her. How long ago it seems since that old woman put this in my hands, and told me that mysterious story of Vivienne's birth and parentage ! What a ridiculous notion she had about the girl being related to the De Verdreuil ! I am glad I never mentioned it. Raoul or his father would have been sure to have set to work to prove her something very great or wonderful. I wonder what has become of her now ? I should like to know. How strange that I should think of her to-night, though—to-night, when my own fate ought to engross every consideration of my heart !"

Then she drew the desk towards her, and opened it. Its contents were a ring and a few letters, yellow and worn with age, and tied together by ribbon equally faded and discoloured. She unfastened them, and glanced carelessly at their contents. Apparently they did not interest her, for she tossed them aside, saying half aloud, "I had better burn them all ; they are rubbish, and hold no clue to the old woman's story." The ring she looked at more closely ; a curious old-fashioned ring it was, and one that seemed to bring some memory back to her again ; for she turned a shade paler than before, and her hand trembled as she held it.

"After all it *might* be true," she murmured. "How strange it seems to think of it ! But even if it were, these letters prove no marriage. Not in one of them does he allude to her as his wife."

She took the desk to the lamp near her, and examined it more closely. It looked so deep from the outside, and yet, when opened, the receptacle for letters was unusually shallow. Could it contain a secret drawer ? she wondered. She passed her hand

over every part of it carefully. What was that? Something very small, like a tiny round button, caught her finger in its passage over the smooth surface of the interior. She pressed it slightly, then more forcibly. Suddenly the bottom of the desk rose up like a lid, and revealed below a drawer containing several letters, and a folded and addressed paper, with the inscription uppermost. Instinctively Blanche de Verdreuil clutched them, and drew them forth from their hiding-place.

She read the address of the folded paper first, and as she read it every vestige of colour fled from her face, and she trembled in every limb. She opened it out; it was a will!

With cheeks blanched, with eyes strained and terrified, she read it; and as she read she knew her labour had been in vain—that, even if the husband she had wronged had not risen from the grave of that terrible past, another avenger could wrest from her the possessions she had won by treachery and falsehood.

“Doubly lost—doubly lost!” she cried wildly; “trapped and caught like a hunted animal! Oh! if only I dared to die this night!”

In her fear and her horror she crushed the paper in her grasp, and glanced wildly around. Her impulse was to destroy it. The voice of the dead—the wishes of the dead—what were they to her? A touch, and the whole evidence of Vivienne’s birth, of Vivienne’s heritage, could be destroyed irrevocably.

“No wonder I hated her!” she muttered to herself, as her trembling hands clutched convulsively the faded, time-worn documents, whose importance was so vital a thing. “No wonder I recognized in her an enemy, and a perilous one. If she knew of *this*!”

She took the papers and advanced swiftly to the fire. Its ashes were still alive; there was sufficient heat in them to destroy these fatal proofs. But just as her hand was outstretched to cast them in the grate, a sudden chilling terror seemed to overcome her. A fear, deadly and horrible, numbed her limbs, and chilled her blood.

She felt as if she were *not alone*.

Her eyes, distended with fear and alarm, glanced round in nervous dread. Her very limbs seemed suddenly frozen and powerless beneath the touch of this unnatural horror.

Before her, in the darkness of the shadowy room, a shape, indistinct and terrible, seemed to rise. The grey, stony face, the stern, sad eyes of the dead Count de Verdreuil looked once more on her—his arm outstretched and pointing to the papers in her hand—his face dark and wrathful as when she had made him believe in his son’s dishonour!

Was it a vision conjured up by her own distempered brain—her overwrought fancy? She never knew. It only seemed to her in that moment that the dead had arisen to protect the living—that her hands were powerless to accomplish the deed of destruction—for in the grey, chill dawn, with that awful, shapeless form, those fixed stony eyes upon her, Blanche de Verdreuil's arm fell helpless by her side, and the papers rustled on the floor, harmless and safe.

Then through the stillness and silence of the Château of Renonçeux, a shriek, wild and fearful, rang out from the lips of the terrified woman—a shriek that echoed through the vast corridors and deserted rooms, and curdled the very blood of those who heard it, as they sprang, startled and aroused from their sleep, to seek its cause.

There, in the grey dusk of the early day, they found their mistress stretched senseless and cold on the floor of her apartments, with such a look upon her face as the dead might wear from whom life has been stricken in a moment of agony.

CHAPTER V

IN DEEDS—NOT YEARS.

“ We live in deeds, not years ; in thoughts, not breaths ;
In feelings, not in figures on a dial.
We should count time by heart-throbs.”

THE world of Paris had a new sensation over which to excite itself.

The beautiful Countess de Verdreuil had chosen to leave the city in the very commencement of the season, without a word of explanation or excuse. What was the reason?

All wondered ; none could tell. Mystery shrouded her, and rumour busied itself with her name, and curious tongues to whom her honour and success were bitter as wormwood, made light of her reputation and weaved airy scandals, and sent forth poisoned falsehoods, and the world began to distrust what it could not understand, and what she had not thought fit to explain.

But Blanche de Verdreuil heeded not, cared not. Her one thought now was safety and concealment, and she laid her plans accordingly. Already the avengers were on her track ; already

watchful eyes noted and reported of her actions to Raoul de Verdreuil, and he knew that when the hour came, when his vengeance was ripe, and his proofs incontrovertible, *then* she could not hide from him any longer. The laws she had outraged would pursue and seize upon her, no matter whether she fled to the uttermost parts of the earth, or awaited her doom at Renonçeux itself.

But, till his plans were ripe and his proofs certain, he troubled her by no sign. She fled from place to place, under the impression that she was eluding and baffling all pursuit, and Raoul laughed amusedly to himself as he heard of it, knowing so well how useless it was, knowing, too, that the moment he chose to lay his hand upon her and arrest her progress, he could do it with the utmost ease.

So as the months went on, and still no sign was made, no evidence of discovery given: Blanche de Verdreuil began to breathe freely once more. Perhaps after all she had been alarming herself unnecessarily; perhaps Viotti had no intention of pursuing her. Hope began to live in her heart again. The first shock of terror subsided, and Blanche de Verdreuil assured herself again and again that her fears had been utterly groundless.

One day she held in her hands an Italian paper, whose contents she was scanning carelessly and indifferently. A paragraph in it at last arrested her notice. She began to read it—at first indifferently, then eagerly—while her cheeks flushed and her eyes grew bright, and the swift dawn of hope made her bosom heave with quick, breathless gasps of wonder and relief.

She read that “a little boat containing two men had been lost in the Bay of Naples during a sudden storm. It contained only a boatman and an Italian—Carlo Viotti by name—a stranger to Naples,” the paper went on to say, “and one who had only arrived there a short time before, ostensibly on business connected with the Government, as he was secretary to a member of the French Legation. The boat had capsized, and both the men had been drowned ere assistance could reach them.”

This paragraph was like the beginning of a new life to the guilty woman. Her enemy was dead! *She was safe.*

These two thoughts took instantaneous possession of her mind, and absorbed her now to the utter exclusion of all previous fear.

Then, when prudence asserted itself once more, she resolved to make inquiries herself as to the identity of the drowned man with that of the Carlo Viotti she dreaded. With the birth of new hope there sprang up in her again the longings for that old life of excitement and joy and pleasure which she had fled from in the vague horror of her discovery in Paris. Were this man dead, she need deny herself that life no longer; excuses for her sudden

absence could soon be framed by her ready invention. Her health had given way; her physicians had ordered change of scene and air: that would satisfy the world, once she returned to it. And again she basked in the sunshine of its imaginary welcome, the music of its adulation, the favour of its smiles.

Again and again she read the paper, and the more she read it, the more she was convinced that the Carlo Viotti there mentioned was indeed the husband of her girlhood, the man from whom she had fled, not because she had wearied of him so much as because he could no longer give her those things which made the paradise of her life; for the selfish, grasping heart of this woman only longed for the one surpassing joy of possessing the wherewithal to make her life one of ease and splendour and luxury.

To gain these possessions she had sacrificed honour and truth; and, having gained them, she had been content till fear robbed her heart of its joy, and her conscience, roused from its long sleep, bade her behold in the man she had first wronged the avenger of all her previous sins.

All these years she had utterly forgotten this man. When the Count de Verdreuil had come in her way, she had accepted his offer without a regret for the crime she was committing. From the moment she had forsaken Viotti her life had been one of recklessness and sin. Her lover had soon wearied of her, and then, left to her own resources, she had used her beauty and her arts unsparingly. It was in Italy that the idea of her pretended decease first occurred to her, and she had put it into execution, aided by the ready help and keen wit of the Contessa Lorenzo, wife of the notorious Florentine gambler, whose tragic end Raoul had related at the masked ball. At Florence Raoul de Verdreuil first met this woman, who was represented as the niece of the contessa. Her rare and exquisite loveliness drew many of the wealthiest and noblest men of the city to the gambler's table, and he used her as a tool for his own purposes. A young Florentine noble had taken Raoul to the count's house, and introduced him to the beautiful girl about whom the whole city was raving. It suited Blanche at that time to adopt the rôle of innocence and virtue; but Raoul suspected her from the first, and watched her narrowly. His coldness and indifference to one so used to capture and enslave all men who came in her way first piqued, then interested, and finally roused in this woman a fierce and reckless love for him. Regardless of consequences, reckless of results, she disgusted Raoul de Verdreuil by a sudden self-betrayal of the feelings he had inspired; and in that moment she learnt how this man, who had first taught her the meaning of a passion she had scorned the possibility of feeling, suspected her real character and the secret of her past life. She had long

changed the name of Blanche Lecroix, under which she had married Viotti. After her pretended death she assumed the name of Blanche de Courville.

Even Count Lorenzo and his wife never knew her by any other. It chanced, however, that one day while Raoul was at the villa, waiting for the count's appearance, he saw a small neatly-bound volume lying on one of the tables in the room. Opening it carelessly, he saw that it was a Roman Catholic Prayer-book ; just as he was about to lay it down, a name on the fly-leaf caught his eye ; it was *Blanche Lecroix*. Ere he had time to read more, the door opened, and the countess and her niece entered. The girl's eyes fell immediately on the book which Raoul was just replacing, and she turned so deadly white that he thought she was about to faint. In a few moments, however, she recovered her self-possession, and talked and laughed as though nothing had happened.

Raoul never saw that book again.

One day, when he casually mentioned the name, she grew so suddenly and strangely agitated that he was more than ever convinced some dark mystery lay hidden away in the past years of her life, which he could not at that time fathom. He never did fathom it either, till he heard Viotti's story, and then saw revealed with terrible clearness the whole past infamy and shame of the woman who had passed so long as his father's wife.

The old Count de Verdreuil had met her in Paris years after the Florentine episode, and the moment she met him Blanche resolved to spare no pains to bring him to her feet, to deal back to Raoul some of the shame and humiliation which he had given her as payment of an unsought love. She had succeeded only too well.

Ere the news of that strange and sudden marriage reached Raoul de Verdreuil she was safely enthroned at Renonçeux, and her power over her husband was so great that she found no difficulty in making him believe the story she invented which gave her life no shame, and her beauty no sin, save distressed innocence and straitened circumstances.

In his first rage and madness Raoul strove to open his father's eyes to the worse than folly of his conduct, but the effort was fruitless. He would believe no ill of his idol ; he had made her his wife in the fulness of his faith and trust, and Raoul's words and remonstrances were worse than useless. He lived in that same fool's paradise of belief till the day of his death. He had given this woman the old stainless name, the last possessions of his race. He had wronged his only son for her sake, and now he had gone to that land from whence no traveller returns, and the wrong he had committed was irreparable.

Such had been Blanche de Verdreuil's life ; but in the present relief of her heart she gave no thought to these things. She longed so to assure herself of her safety that she even forgot her fear of discovery, and she formed a scheme in her own mind for the sole purpose of making her belief certainty. Suspense was intolerable now ; she could bear it no longer. The flight, the pursuit, the haunting dread of her life for these past months was torture to her now. She resolved to put an end to it at once. She would go to Naples *incognita*. None should know her name or rank. She would herself institute all inquiries about this accident, and discover whether the drowned man was really her avenger. If so, farewell to fear and dread. Once more the old life would be hers ; once more the delights of the world would charm from her all sense of danger or regret ; once more the age she lived in would accept her and deify her as of old, because she had won its passport to honour—success.

So she soothed her fears now ; so she schemed and plotted afresh for the glory of new triumphs and the forgetfulness of past shame ; and so too she skilfully hid her real rank, and concealed her real name, while with all the speed of wind and rail she flew swiftly on to the far-off coast whose smiling seas had drawn to their treacherous depths the man from whom she had fled in terror since the moment she had read recognition in his eyes, and with that recognition the sure coming of his vengeance !

CHAPTER VI.

THE DIVINITY OF THE SOULLESS.

“ Naples! thou heart of man which ever pantest
 Naked beneath the lidless eye of Heaven !
 Elysian city, which to calm enchantest
 The mutinous air and sea ; they round thee, even
 As sleep round love, are driven ! ”

Shelley.

THE splendour of the noon-day sun shone full upon the white walls, the myrtle groves, the orangeries, with their wealth of golden fruit, the half-wild, half-cultivated beauty of a villa on the outskirts of Naples. The drowsy hum of the insects as they passed from flower to flower, the heavy fragrance of innumerable blossoms, the utter stillness around and about, gave no sign of human life. The windows of the villa were open, and the blinds

were drawn partially down to keep out the heat of the sun-rays, and in the interior of one of the rooms a woman sat alone. She seemed to be waiting for some one, for from time to time she glanced impatiently at the door, then at the tiny jewelled watch hanging from its pendant beside her.

Presently the sound of footsteps sounded in the passage without. The door opened, and a servant ushered into her presence a man who, from his dress and manner, seemed to belong to the maritime authorities of the port.

He bowed respectfully, and she signed him to be seated.

"I wish to make some inquiries respecting this accident," she said, pointing to a paragraph in the paper beside her, which he took, glanced at, and then laid down again.

"*Sì, Illustrissima!*"

"The paper says the two men were drowned ere help could reach them. Is that so?"

The man broke forth into a flow of voluble Neapolitan *patois*, assuring her that it was true. There was no blame to be attached to any one. A sudden squall had broken over the bay; ere any assistance could be rendered, the boat was capsized. It was on its way to Capri, and both the boatman and his passenger had been drowned—that is to say, no one had heard anything of them since, and, if either had been picked up by any other boat, news would have reached the town without doubt. It was very sad, very deplorable; but then the signora would go over in spite of the threatening weather, and now he was lost.

He shrugged his shoulders, and hoped he was no friend of the illustrious signora; but really no one could have prevented the accident or assisted either of the men—it was quite impossible.

The signora sat in meditative silence for some moments, as he finished his protestations and excuses. Then she said suddenly, drawing out her purse as she spoke,—

"Can you describe to me the appearance of the boatman's passenger? I should like to know it. From the name mentioned, I have some slight fancy that I knew him once myself. I can tell whether I am correct if I hear a description."

"Oh, yes," the man answered readily, "he was an Italian, signora; he was tall, slight made, with dark eyes, jet-black hair, olive complexion. He had been a week at Naples, and spent his time in going backwards and forwards from there to Capri or Amalfi. He seemed fond of boating, was quite alone, and professed to be waiting for despatches from the Government."

The signora drew a deep breath of relief; the description was exact. It answered to her knowledge of the drowned man with

perfect accuracy. She placed a piece of gold in the palm of her informant, and then signified that the interview was over, and he might retire. As soon as she was alone, she sprang to her feet and went to an inner room adjoining the one where this interview had taken place.

She looked at herself in the glass with a smile of playing round her lips. Then she raised her hand and divested herself of a shrouding mantilla of heavy black lace, removing at the same time a mass of dark chestnut curls, and revealing underneath the waving tresses of her own shining hair.

"Now I am myself again!" she said, with a low, soft laugh of triumph. "Truly luck befriends me at all points; I am not destined to be vanquished yet."

Perhaps she was right. Luck seemed to befriend her most amazingly, for luck is ever the divinity of the soulless!

* * * *

With the fall of evening all Naples knew that the Villa d'Alfieri had been taken for a month by a beautiful, wealthy, and titled countess, travelling for her health. Fabulous reports were spread as to her beauty and her rank, and, ere three days had passed, all the illustrious visitors and inhabitants of the town had been to call upon her, and returned with yet more wonderful reports of her loveliness and her fascination.

Blanche had thrown aside all caution now. Her enforced flight—her temporary seclusion from the gaities which were to her the very soul and essence of enjoyment—all made her long to secure them once again, to exercise her old sorcery over men, to bask in the sunshine of flattery and praise, and receive the homage she had been compelled to forego. Her secret was safe; her avenger was dead! The blue, smiling waters of the bay below her villa held all the proofs she dreaded—all the vengeance she had feared—and her heart rejoiced in its safety. Her beauty shone out afresh in the sunshine of security, and, forgetful of all else save the enjoyment of the present, the Countess de Verdreuil, as she still styled herself, prepared to hold her court, and live her old life of recklessness and extravagance in the very place where the husband of her youth had met his death but a few brief weeks before.

On that very day when she had sought the proof and certainty of Viotti's death from the official at the harbour, she made up her mind to give no further thought to precaution.

Why should she hide herself any longer? Whom had she to fear?

She roamed from room to room of the beautiful little villa she had rented, resolving to fill it with guests, to resign all thoughts of solitude and retirement, and return to Paris in the winter. The light and lustre stole brightly back to her eyes; the soft, sea-shell bloom warmed her cheeks. Her step grew buoyant

with hope, and her voice carolled forth its joy like a bird when it sees the spring budding forth again over a land where winter has reigned all too long. All the day her heart was light with its glad relief, and her mind at rest from its long and heavy-weighted fear. With the night she went out in the balcony of her villa, and stood gazing down at the far-off waters of the beautiful bay.

All around her was the cloudless beauty of the summer night. Lights were shining star-like from the villas scattered around—shining through groves of olive and cistus and arbutus woods like glowworms among some heavy-leaved foliage.

She stood gazing out at it all with a strange sense of relief and gladness at her heart. She promised herself a long and serene enjoyment of life from this time forward. She was even now planning great and brilliant festivities which should arouse the wonder and envy of all; and with the starlit radiance of the sky above, and the full warm glow of light from the opened windows behind her, she was revealed fully and perfectly to the watching, cautious gaze of a man in the tangled shrubberies of the garden beneath her balcony—a man cloaked and shrouded, as if for disguise, and whose figure mingled with the shadows around so closely that none could perceive him. His eyes looked out from amidst the wealth of shrubs and creepers, and rested searchingly with a keen, piercing scrutiny on the face and form of the beautiful woman who leant in serene unconsciousness over the light ironwork of the balcony.

He saw her clearly and distinctly—the light falling on the golden waves of her hair, on her bare, snowy shoulders, her white, curved arms. How fair she looked—how young still! The years had not robbed her cheek of its rich bloom—her lips of their scarlet glow; no sign of weariness or age was yet about her. She looked as fair, as alluring, as when in her girlish loveliness she had dazzled her young lover's eyes with her beauty, and bewitched him by her arts. Did the watchful eyes see her as she had been then, or had the glamour of love departed and left him, who had known it in those far-off days of his youth, "a sadder and a wiser man"?

His scrutiny never altered. Sternly, pitilessly, he gazed on the fair, unconscious woman before him. Did he think of a time when she had been his—his in the sweet security of wedded love—his to have and to hold against all the forces of the world? Did he remember aught of that old ecstatic bliss, when, in the mad idolatry of passion, he had deemed the world held no purer, fairer thing than the woman he called wife?—when his lips had lingered on the scarlet mouth, and his hand caressed the gleaming shower of that rippling golden hair? Did he think of these things now?

For the watcher in that thicket of tangled shrubs and scented blossoms was the man whom Blanche de Verdreuil deemed dead and silent for evermore, beneath the blue, gleaming waters of the bay below. He had been picked up just as he was sinking for the last time by a Caprian fisherman, who had drawn him into his boat and taken him home to his little cabin on the coast. There he had lain for some days in a state of exhaustion and stupor ; but at last he recovered, though for weeks he was too weak and feeble to move far from the cabin, or make any exertion to return to Naples. Thus the report of his death was never contradicted. The boatman who had been rowing him was really drowned, and no paper reached Viotti in his humble little shelter to give the account of his supposed death. He was awaiting Raoul at Naples, and as soon as he could collect his thoughts again he sent one of the fisher-lads of his preserver to call there for letters or papers. There was only one letter, and that contained the news that his friend would arrive in Naples in the course of a few weeks, and he was to await him there. So Viotti remained in Capri, resting and gradually recovering health and strength ; and none knew of his rescue yet.

One evening he sailed over to Naples himself, and as he was not sufficiently well known there to attract special notice, he was not recognized as the stranger whom all supposed to have met with his death in the bay.

At the first shop he entered, a dark-eyed contadina was chattering vociferously about the beautiful contessa who had arrived at the Villa d'Alfieri.

"She was French—she was beautiful as a vision, and fair as an angel. She was rich too—so rich, her servants said, that she could buy up all Naples if she wished," and so on. Viotti listened with languid amusement to the girl's voluble information. She was so full of her theme she could talk of nothing else. Presently she let fall the name of this illustrious wonder. The pronunciation was strange, but something in it attracted Viotti's ear. He turned to the girl, and put a few brief questions to her, which speedily brought forth loquacious answers.

"No, she had not seen the contessa ; but the gardener at the villa had told her how angelically beautiful she was, and that she was travelling for her health, and the physicians had ordered her to Naples."

"When did she arrive?"

"Only the previous day. No one had seen her yet but just her people at the villa. The villa had been to let a long time. It was expensive, but the contessa was so rich, what was that to her? And she had taken it for a month certain. She would stay longer if the air agreed with her."

"Where is the villa?" Viotti asked.

"Oh! far up on the hill-side. You followed the road leading direct from the town; the way was plain enough, and the villa was the largest and handsomest in Naples. It had been to let long because its rent was high, and only the foreign signori ever had money enough to take it."

Viotti was silent for a moment, evidently deep in thought. Then he seemed to have formed some resolution. If it was as he suspected, and this woman, who had been flying from him in fear, had by some strange chance come to the very spot where he was located, it was surely the very strangest and most incomprehensible thing he had ever met with. What was her object in coming to Naples? When last heard of, she had been living in a remote village in Switzerland—a little world-forgotten, solitary place, where even tourists seldom penetrated. To have come to Naples so suddenly! What could be her reason?

With a few laughing words to the *contadina* he left her and went slowly up the white dusty road to the villa whither she had directed him. It was a long walk, but he reached it at last.

There he paused and asked himself what he should do. He could not gain admission without some ostensible reason—and that was not his object either. He wished to see this lady, if possible, unknown to herself or any of her attendants. How could he manage it? The entrance gates were shut. He could see the winding path, bordered by heavy shrubs and dark trees, which led up to the villa, but he could not enter in. He walked slowly round, glancing ever and anon at the white gleaming walls, the masses of heavy foliage, and wondering how he could manage to effect an entrance. In his circuit round the exterior of the grounds, he came upon a small gate which seemed to lead into a piece of waste-ground beyond the gardens. He tried the latch; it gave readily and quickly to his touch, and without further trouble he found himself in the shrubbery of the villa itself. It was while he stood there, watching the gleam of light through the open windows, and gazing eagerly into the dainty, luxurious chambers above, that Blanche left the room where she had been sitting alone, and came out into the balcony.

Viotti strained his eyes to catch sight of her face, and, all unconscious of her danger, she bent forward with the full light of the moon above her head, and the radiance of the chamber beyond revealing her to his sight as distinctly and clearly as he needed.

His heart seemed to stand still with a sickening pang: a feverish hatred of this woman, whose loveliness had been his curse, stole through his veins. In the warm, balmy sweetness of the summer night he shivered with an icy chill. He could have seized her where she stood, and crushed out her life and her beauty with the fierce and ruthless hatred of a desert brute.

His wrongs alone were remembered. Her very loveliness did but inflame and torment him afresh with the longing for vengeance.

It was absolute torture to him to stand there and gaze on that fair, smiling, radiant creature, and know the vileness and the infamy of her life—know she was but a painted lie—a thing to work men's ruin and curse men's lives, and yet smile and live, and even enjoy her own !

And yet he restrained himself, though his eyes never left her, and the sweet, hushed silence of the night held no calming spell for the fever in his veins—the wild passions surging and raging in his heart.

"Such women as she it is who make men murderers !" he muttered hoarsely.

He shuddered at the thought, but it came again and again, coiling itself snake-like round his heart in cold, poisonous folds, hissing its tempting through every vein and fibre of his frame, till his hands clenched the fragile blossoms before him in their agony, and the cold dew stood on his brow with the torture under which he writhed.

He had had but one religion in his life—love ! love for this woman who had duped, and cheated, and wronged him—wronged him as utterly as the measure of his love had been boundless ; cheated him as remorselessly as his own belief had been blind and passionate and true.

He thought of his wasted years, his neglected talents, the vileness and infamy to which he had given himself up when she had betrayed and forsaken him ; and every thought and every memory which throbbed in his heart nerved him afresh to the one relentless purpose he had set himself—vengeance on her !

Remorselessly she had slain his happiness, so in like manner would he avenge its death. A thing so beautiful, yet so vile, so dangerous and so deadly, deserved no mercy at his hands, nor should she find it. She had given him over to such despair as had well-nigh maddened his brain and destroyed his reason. What claim had she on his pity now ? She had slain it with her own hand, forfeited it by her own act, long years ago !

As he stood and looked at her, he cursed her in his heart. When at last she turned away and entered her lighted, daintily-furnished boudoir, he stole softly out from the shadows of the leafy screen which had hidden him from her sight, and with all the worst passions of his southern nature roused and loosed by her presence, he left the villa grounds and went out and back to Capri over the starlit waters, with the knowledge that his traitress was at last at his mercy and in his power.

BOOK VI.

CHAPTER I.

LEARNT IN SUFFERING.

"They learn in suffering
What they teach in song."—*Shelley*.

A VILLA stands amongst the hills of Florence.

It has been long deserted ; it is half-ruined with neglect ; there are broken sculptures on the terraces, and broken windows in what was once the chapel. There are few habitable rooms in the whole building, and the very grounds are a wilderness, though their wealth of flowering shrubs and graceful creepers makes even their desolation beautiful.

In the gardens there are trees covered with snowy blossoms, and lilies grow amongst the tangled grasses, and the crimson glory of the oleander-buds gleams brightly forth at the warm touch of the resting sunbeams.

One can see the city far below ; the towers and spires of its many churches, the sculptured marbles of its buildings gleaming white and clear in the light of the early summer day ; and farther away, in the purple haze of the distance, are the leafy woods and forest depths of Vallombrosa. It is a place for an artist to dream—for a poet to write—this picturesque, half-ruined spot, with the loveliness around and about it, and that sweeping canopy of blue above, and the distant height of mountains clasping the landscape like a belt, with the white gleam of their eternal snows melting into the azure depths of the sky.

The villa stands high on the hill-side—far above the meadows where the lilies bloom—far above the fair city whose marbles glisten through the veil of olive-leaves in the gardens beyond.

Birds are singing in the garden, and all the brightness and beauty of the summer day are strewn broadcast over the deserted grounds. A window is half-open in one of the rooms, and from within comes the sound of a girl's voice, fresh, sweet, yet mournful withal, as though a burden of sadness thrilled through the melody of the notes. Through the open windows the voice floats with its passionate, soul-stirred beauty ; and it

echoes through the silence of the flower-scented gardens, where the bees are sipping the sweets of the blossoms, and the birds are flitting from the leafy boughs.

Then it ceases suddenly, and the singer comes to the open window and looks down at the gardens below. The hour is scarce noon. The air is languid with heat and heavy with fragrance. The breeze sweeps down from the far-off pine-woods, and showers the peach-blossoms on the tangled grasses, and blows the scents of the vines and the almond trees lazily over the hills, scarcely seeming to stir the leaves of the one, or the blossoms of the other. The singer is a girl—young—yet with marks of care on her fair face, subduing its brilliant beauty, and giving the dark, lustrous eyes a grave, weary look, far more troubled than her youth should know yet.

She is a great singer, the world says, yet only two years ago she was unknown. Now she has risen to sudden fame; she has won great triumphs; and though none know her history or her name, save that she came to Milan, and appeared first at the Opera House there, in the character of the heroine in "*Rigoletto*," she has made cities ring with her praises, and marvel at her voice, and acknowledge her genius, which is no less great than her beauty. Yet she lives in the strictest retirement. None can gain admission to her dwelling; none can boast that her acquaintance or friendship has been gained. But her very seclusion adds to her fame; the mystery enshrouding her gives her beauty additional lustre—her presence rarer charms. Triumphs innumerable she has won; yet off the stage her life is almost nun-like in its severity and seclusion, and her home is guarded by a dragon-like duenna, who is alike stolidly indifferent to bribery and persuasion, and above all devoted to her fair young charge. Signora Véronique is the name by which the world knows her, and of aught else they are in total ignorance.

Yet the girl who leans out from the window of that Florentine villa is strangely like the Vivienne St. Maurice who disappeared so mysteriously from the château of Renonçeux after the Count de Verdreuil's death—strangely like the girl who, maddened by the taunts and tortured by the insults of her guardian, fled in the gloom and storm of the autumn night, with the one desperate resolve of escape, the only feeling in her wounded, stricken heart—fled to freedom or to death, she cared not which, so that her secret was safe, so that her fate was unknown, so that never again the cruel, merciless taunts of her persecutor might wound and sting her to the verge of madness.

Yes, Irene Véronique and Vivienne St. Maurice are one and the same. The girl who had sunk senseless and helpless down on the forest-path of the woods of Renonçeux, with the wild, stormy night and the fierce warfare of the elements the sole

witnesses of her agony and despair, is now the great singer of whom the world speaks so enthusiastically—of whose future it prophesies great and wonderful things—of whose past it knows nothing.

Vivienne had been saved by one of those God-sent chances which sometimes befriend us in our hours of peril ; saved by one of a wandering tribe of gipsies encamped in the woods of Renougeux. Her life had been in sore danger for long after, and they had taken her with them on their wanderings, and nursed and tended her back to health and strength again ; though for many months her reason wavered in the balance, and the events of that dreadful night tortured her weak, bewildered brain with innumerable horrors. But the picturesque, wandering life—the free, open-air existence she led—restored her more than anything else would have done. Slowly and gradually she recovered, and with bodily health and bodily strength came back once more all the longings for the life so long denied her.

She knew her voice was in itself a mine of gold—that its finished cultivation made any further instruction unnecessary ; and as soon as she could safely leave her strange protectors she began to meditate upon the best means of furthering her views as to her future life. At first she only accepted a subordinate part in a small theatre, but her voice was so magnificent—her talents so undoubted—that they won fame for her ere she herself was aware of it. The manager of an opera-house heard her sing in one of the smaller towns in Italy. He sought her out and offered her an engagement in Bologna. From there she went to Milan—everywhere winning fresh laurels, greater triumphs, wider fame. Now she had accepted an engagement in Florence, and had taken this deserted, remote villa for the time of her stay, because of its picturesque situation, its wild, desolate beauty, its absence from the noise and bustle of the city itself ; and she it is who stands now at the open casement of her room and gazes wistfully out at the golden sunlight and the wavering shadows, while afar off stretch the dark pine-woods and dense, sombre forests sloping gradually upto Vallombrosa.

Of what does she think as she stands there with that far-off look in her eyes, that shadow on the fairness of her face ?

Of the changes her life has known, though its years number but twenty-two—of the memories of her girlhood—of the pleasures of that brief, unclouded time when love, with its sorcery of joy, had thrown its golden glamour round each hour she lived.

The sunshine of the outer world is around her, shedding its bright gold on her hair as she leans out in the warmth of its noontide glow. The birds sing happy songs in the shelter of the blossoming boughs ; the butterflies flit from flower to flower in the gardeus below, and the bees rifle the sweets from the wild

white roses climbing round the window-frames, and hum the drowsy song of their lazy content in the glory of the summer hours.

She stands and listens and watches it all ; but now the summer hours bring her no golden dreams of the future ; only saddest memories of the past she would fain forget—and cannot. For Vivienne is a child no longer. Her nature has been stirred and wakened, her heart has been wounded, her innocent faith deceived ; and a woman's soul is within that fair, girlish form now—a woman's dignity and fearlessness shine in the lustrous eyes, once so shy and childlike. She has known suffering, she has known pain ; yet she has never forgotten or changed that old allegiance of her youth. Its pain is with her still, its agony of shame and wounded pride is never forgotten ; above all other things she dreads the thought of meeting Raoul de Verdreuil ever again, and yet she knows none will be so dear to her in all her life henceforward. She is nothing to him—no—of that fact she assures herself with a certain proud humility that shows how little thought of her own worthiness to be anything to him is left with her. Blanche de Verdreuil killed such hope only too successfully, and Vivienne only prays still, with burning blushes kindling in her cheeks, that never, never again may Raoul cross her path, since her secret is known to him—since he, who cares so little for any woman living, has learnt her wild, hopeless love, and scorned and pitied and neglected her from that hour. Of his love for the countess she does not think ; she doubts Blanche de Verdreuil's word on that subject, though at times she had been half inclined to believe it.

But these two memories—of her enemy and the man she loved—are ever present with her. Even in the hours of her stage-triumphs she trembles and pales at some fancied resemblance to one or other of them. Off the stage she will see no one ; most of her business arrangements are conducted by letter ; she has a dread and horror of strangers quite unaccountable, and she shuts herself up from all pleasures or gaieties of the world as rigidly as though they were sinful and hateful to her.

A strange life for one so young and lovely to lead is that which Vivienne St. Maurice has chosen, and it has told upon her already. She is so grave, so silent, so different from the radiant, buoyant girl she used to be ; and her manner is haughty and dignified, and self-reliant in an extraordinary degree. To look on that proud, pure face is enough to set calumny at defiance ; and the world has never whispered a single scandal detrimental to her honour, in spite of her lonely and almost unprotected life, and the mystery surrounding her antecedents.

She was companionless, save for the old Italian lady whom she had taken to live with her, and who loved this fair, friendless girl as though she were her own child ; her guardianship was

as strict and incorruptible as though the young singer's reputation was precious to her above all other considerations in the world. Yet she too wondered what story lay in the hidden past of this girl's former life. What gave such sadness to the fair, proud face? What filled the eyes at times with such passionate pain, such yearning tenderness? for to her as to the world Vivienne's history was a sealed book. That the girl was not happy she knew. A self-restrained life, such as she led, was not suited to her nature; the feverish triumphs of the stage, the sudden accession to fame, could not content her always; she loved her art devotedly, but she craved for human love and human sympathy as well, for she was a woman—and women are not often capable of such complete abnegation of the instincts and requirements of their nature as to find their sole happiness in fame and success—even so great as Vivienne's had been.

And in spite of her love for art, in spite of the triumphs and independence of her daily life, Vivienne was not happy—not even so happy as when, with the pain and perplexity of her life at Renonçeux, the constant tax on her time and obedience which the Countess de Verdreuil had demanded, there still lingered deep down in her heart the sweet, untroubled fancies of her love-dream. She lived in utter solitude; of the world she knew little; of the friends and acquaintances of her past life, in Paris or at Renonçeux, she never heard; and when at night she went to the physical and mental fatigues of the stage, it was more for the real love and the real genius she had for art than because she valued the victories she gained and the homage she received. They were of worth because they showed her own worth, because she knew they were the frank, spontaneous utterance of a people's sympathy and appreciation, not bought or purchased by any baser coin than simple merit.

And strange as was the existence she had chosen for herself, no taint of worldly impurity ever came near her; the grave, sweet calm, the tranquil, unapproachable dignity of her manner, were her only safeguards, and her *best*; for if a woman's own nature cannot be her security against insult or reproach—if her own conduct cannot give the lie to calumny, and shield her from opprobrium and shame—the chief protection she can own is wanting, and the fault lies with herself. The world is bad enough, and heartless enough, God knows, but neither so bad nor so heartless as to wantonly destroy a thing so fragile and so beautiful as a woman's purity for the mere sake of the pleasure it takes in believing the worst of her, while knowing nothing but the best.

Evil may have been, and was, indeed, often round the beautiful young singer; on the stage and off, her loveliness was too rare and too perfect not to attract observation, and excite passions

base and unworthy as well as noble and sincere ; but the evil never touched her, never approached her so nearly that it grew loathsome and offensive. In that most difficult position and most trying ordeal for a woman's purity—the publicity of the stage—the constant criticism and notice of the world around her—she yet maintained her dignity and knew no stain upon her honour. And she herself was so young, so gifted, so exquisitely lovely, that she won all hearts to an enthusiastic admiration, a reverent worship, perhaps as novel as it was genuine and sincere.

Such had been her life for the past two years, while the three inmates of her former home, who had each played an important part in her early history, were scattered in different parts of the world ; while neither Raoul de Verdreuil amidst his official duties, nor Albert Hoffmann in his absorbing studies, nor Blanche de Verdreuil in her new-born terror and her reckless flight from place to place, knew anything of her. Raoul imagined she must still be with the countess, and in the rare occasions of Albert's letters marvelled that he never spoke of her. Albert had written to her at Renonçeux, and, receiving no answer, thought she must have gone abroad with her guardian.

Blanche herself gave no further heed to her from the time she had fled from her roof, and as Raoul never breathed a word of his strange and important discoveries respecting the history of the false Countess of Renonçeux to Albert, the fact of Vivienne's flight was still unknown to either of the two friends.

So at the time of Vivienne's visit to Florence they were in total ignorance both of her departure from Renonçeux, and her stage life and new title ; yet the web of fate was drawing them nearer and nearer day by day, and, unconsciously to each, the time was not far distant when their lives should cross and meet again with a stranger and deeper interest encircling them than any previous knowledge had foretold.

CHAPTER II.

LOVE IN VAIN.

“ And is not love in vain,
Torture enough without a living tomb ? ”—*Byron.*

“ A FOREIGN signor has called to see the Signora Véronique ! ”

Vivienne turned abruptly from the window at this announcement.

“ You know I receive no one here,” she said haughtily. “ I cannot see him, Maruccio. Tell him that.”

"May not this be some one who knows you, Irene?" said the gentle voice of the old Italian lady, who was seated at the farthest end of the room. "It is scarcely well to dismiss him without asking even his name."

The girl sighed wearily.

"I care not," she answered; "there is no one in the world I wish to see. A strange face, or even a familiar one, is intolerable to me sometimes!"

"But it is not well for thee, *carissima*," said her friend gently, "to be so lonely always. The life will tell on thee day by day till all thy fair bright youth is sapped and withered by such unnatural restraint."

"Here is Maruccio again," said Vivienne. "Well, has he not gone yet?" she added impatiently.

"Si, signora," said the woman as she handed her young mistress a card. "The signor left immediately; he looked sadly distressed at your message, and he left this card for you and a letter."

"Lay them down there," said Vivienne negligently. "I will look at them presently."

The woman obeyed, and left the room.

"Are you not going to read the letter, *carissima*?" inquired Madame Pitteri, as Vivienne made no movement to do so.

The girl smiled a little.

"How anxious you are about this stranger!" she said, as she walked over to the table and looked first at the letter, as its superscription faced her.

A low cry fell from her lips. She turned pale as death; then tore open the envelope and read the contents in a second. The next instant her voice was sounding through the passages,—

"Maruccio! Maruccio! come here, quick!"

Then, as the astonished serving-woman made her appearance, she exclaimed in breathless haste,—

"Haste, Maruccio! fly, and overtake the gentleman who called just now! He cannot have gone far; bring him back immediately!"

The woman obeyed without a word. She ran to the gate. The figure of the visitor was still in sight; he was walking slowly down the shady road leading to the city. She ran swiftly after him, crying out for him to stop as she drew nearer. The sound of the flying feet and excited voice made him look round and pause.

Panting and breathless, Maruccio reached his side.

"Eccellenza!" she cried; "my mistress has sent me to bring you back; she wishes to see you immediately."

The gentleman looked at her in great astonishment.

He was a young man with a fair face, so delicately chiselled, so perfectly faultless in its beauty, that the dark eyes of the Italian woman gazed in admiration at it.

"Your mistress wishes to see me?" he said wonderingly. "Very well, I will come." He turned back and walked beside her in a strange bewilderment; first to be refused admission, then sent for in this hasty manner! Truly Signora Véronique was eccentric in her fancies.

The woman led him back to the villa, and ushered him into a large room lighted by three windows, and furnished with quaint mezzo-tinted cinque-cento furniture that would have delighted a painter's eyes. The room was shaded from the full blaze of the sunshine by blinds outside the windows, and in the faint shadowy light the young man's dazzled eyes could just note a woman's figure standing before him in the centre of the room. An instant, and her voice thrilled the silence with the music that for long had been lost to his heart,—

"Albert! dear Albert! is it indeed you?"

For one brief second of time the young man gazed at her with eyes of incredulous, bewildered joy.

Then her name fell from his lips in passionate ecstasy, in amazed delight,—

"Good heavens, Vivienne! *you*? By what miracle do I find you here?"

"Oh, Albert! Albert!" cried the girl, weeping, laughing, clasping his outstretched hands in a very gladness of welcome and surprise. "It is a miracle indeed! To see you again; to find *you* in Florence! Why, surely the age of wonders has begun!"

His eyes had grown accustomed to the shaded room after the glare of the brilliant sunshine, and he saw before him the Vivienne of old—laughing, tearful, blushing—a hundred times more beautiful, it seemed to him, than when he had parted from her at Renonçeux two years before.

His eyes rested on her; their amazement and wonder brought her back from the excitement and delight of this unexpected meeting.

"You did not know I had become a singer?" she asked, blushing hotly at his searching gaze, and gently freeing her hands from his clasp. "I left Renonçeux long ago. I have heard nothing of it, or any one connected with it since."

"And I never knew," he murmured in bewilderment. "I always thought you were with the countess. How strange it all seems!"

"Come and sit down here, and I will tell you about it," said Vivienne. "It is a long story, but I must put it in as few words as possible. After you left Renonçeux the countess insulted me so grossly that I resolved to leave her. She told me plainly I was a dependent on her bounty—an outcast rescued by her charity. *That* I could not bear. Without a word of my

intentions to her or any one, I left the château. I had no difficulty in securing an engagement. The director of one of the first theatres in Milan offered me one. I came to Italy because I was not known. Nothing would have induced me to appear in Paris, and I left France as soon as I possibly could. I have been singularly fortunate. My voice has done for me all you once prophesied it would do, Albert, and now I am Signora Véronique, the prima donna of the grand opera-house in Florence! There is my history for you."

"But, Vivienne," said the young man hesitatingly, "this is very extraordinary—that you should leave Renonçeux alone, unprotected, without a friend to counsel or advise you. Why did you not apply to me?"

"Why?" The hot blushes came and went on the girl's fair face. "Why? Because I was determined to seek aid from no one; because I could not bear again the taunts of my weak and dependent position; because I resolved I should fight the battle of life for myself, single-handed; and I have succeeded."

Albert looked at her in renewed astonishment. This dignified, fearless creature was very different from the clinging, timid girl he had known at Renonçeux. Truly adversity had changed her in many ways.

He gazed at the beautiful, queenly woman before him, with his wonder speaking all too plainly; and yet a new and reverent admiration of her filled his heart at her words.

"But you cannot live alone," he said at last, "or—are you married, Vivienne?"

She laughed and blushed with some of her old, sweet, girlish shyness.

"Married! no, Albert! But of course, as you say, I do not live alone. I have a duenna, a *chaperon*, in order to satisfy the scruples of this most exacting world of ours. You shall see her presently—a dear old lady she is—a native, too, of my birthplace, Bologna; Signora Pitteri is her name. She has lived with me ever since I wanted a protectress, so you need not suppose I have been altogether careless of appearances since I chose a public profession. Now this is all I mean to tell you about myself. Let me hear of you. Why did you leave Germany? and what strange chance brought you to Florence and to me?"

The face before her grew clouded and saddened as she spoke, and Vivienne noted with sudden pain how changed and worn it looked—how sadly altered from the bright, boyish face of old. The years had not aged it. The dreamy, far-off look still haunted the beautiful violet eyes of the young dreamer she remembered so well, but those eyes were too feverishly bright for health now, and the cheeks were sunken and pale, save for a flush that, ever and anon, warmed the transparent skin with swift and transient

beauty, the broad white brow had lines of care on its smooth surface, and she noted too how slight and thin and almost attenuated was the whole frame and figure of her old friend.

"Ah, Vivienne!" he said softly, "I have not been so fortunate as you. My dreams are dreams still. My life has been one of hardship and difficulty, and fame is as far off as ever."

"Oh, Albert!" cried the girl pityingly, "how strange, how sad! I thought by this time you would be a great man, and——"

"I am little better than a beggar!" interrupted Albert bitterly. "You know, Vivienne, the Count de Verdreuil's death left me entirely dependent on my own resources. Well, the months have drifted into years, and I cannot even gain for my works a hearing. I have come to the conclusion that I am a hopeless failure! It is sad to think that music demands so much, and gains so little! My old master told me I was before the age I live in. I have learnt what that means—neglect and starvation!"

"Oh, Albert! is this true?" cried the girl pityingly. "How grieved I am to hear it!"

"Are you?" he said gently. "Yes; it is true enough. Sometimes I have despaired; sometimes I have renounced all hope, and resolved to be anything but what I am—only somehow I cannot. I suppose music is inborn in me; I cannot do without it; and yet it seems the one most profitless thing in all the world on which to depend. When my master died, I had no home; I have been wandering from one place to another ever since. I was six months in Leipzig. They played my music at the Gewandhaus once. It ran through a hot fire of criticism; it found plenty of admirers—no publishers. Then I came to Italy. I have written a new opera. It has been from one place to another without success. Now tell me what is the reason of all this. Do you not think the fault must lie with me?"

Vivienne looked compassionately at him. "I scarcely know what to say," she answered. "It is difficult to understand the secret of popularity. I often feel wearied of the operas I play, and yet the managers assure me nothing else will satisfy the public. Novelty in music is a thing of suspicion, it appears. Now this I know, Albert: your music is the most wonderfully original music I know of; it is totally unlike any other; therefore you will have a hard battle to fight before it is received. It is not the public you have to fear, it is those who guard the way to the ear of the public. They are always fearful of a new venture, always anxious to keep to the old beaten track, because they know there is a chance of failure or loss in the new. But now this reminds me. What did you want with Signora Véronique, Albert, that you called upon her? Is there anything I can do to assist you?"

The fair, boyish face coloured hotly with the old bashful shyness she remembered so well.

"Oh, Vivienne, forgive me! I did not know it was you. The truth is, I had a letter of introduction to the manager of the opera-house here. I called on him, and he told me that all his arrangements for the season were already made. He looked over my score, though, and made me play some of it over to him. Then he said that his *prima donna*, Signora Véronique, was a great admirer of musical novelties—was always entreating him, in fact, to give her a new *rôle*. If I liked, he would give me a letter of introduction to her. She was very enthusiastic, very generous—in fact, I cannot tell you all his praises of you, Vivienne. She had great influence too, and might do something for me. So I came to this wonderful being, and found—you! That is all."

Vivienne laughed.

"And having found me," she said gaily, "it will go hard with me if I cannot help you, Albert. I owe you all my own success; it is but just I should try and secure yours. The manager who sent you to me is one of my few friends. He is such a kind-hearted, sympathizing man. He must have taken a fancy to you, Albert, or he would never have sent you to me. He knows I rigidly exclude all callers and visitors of your sex from my house."

"Do you?" said Albert wonderingly, as he looked at the lovely face before him, and marvelled how she could keep the homage of the world from her presence.

"Indeed I do! I see no one; I go nowhere. I live here with Madame Pitteri, and I go from here to my stage triumphs, and no one knows more of me than that I am Irene Véronique, nor do I intend them to do so."

"But what a strange life!" said Albert. "Are you not very lonely, Vivienne?"

"Sometimes," she said lightly, "but I have plenty of occupation here. You know, Albert, the pleasures of the great social tread-mill were always rather toilsome to me."

"Yes, I remember," he answered her gravely. "You have chosen wisely, Vivienne. But to most women such a life would be impossible. You must care very little for pleasure or admiration, or the things most dear to women's hearts when once fame trumpets forth their praises to the world!"

She sighed. Little enough she cared for such things, she knew. Her old child-life had been far sweeter, though once she had deemed it only monotonous, simple, and obscure. How she had longed to change it then! How great and precious a thing fame had seemed to her while still unknown. And now, when her desires had been gratified, the vague

sense of that bitter fact which lies at the root of all human attainments, which corrodes the gold of all human greatness—was the only thing her wishes had brought her—disappointment !

She had gained greatness, but she had also lost faith, peace, love. She thought of the tender, homely face of gran'mère—of the simple home amongst the leafy woods—the quaint old kitchen with its bare floor, its worn furniture, its bright array of pewter on the shelves, its wood fire, with the soup-pot simmering above the flames—and she remembered with a pang of regret how she had despised it all—once.

“Ah, Albert !” she cried, half-laughing, half-tearful, as she turned to him again, “I have gained so much, only to wish I had *never* gained it—only to long that I might go back once more to the old, simple life again—only to wish I was a glad, thoughtless child, running wild over the meadows and orchards with the glad, free air about me, and the smiling heavens above ? How foolish we are—we women ! Do we ever know content ?”

Ere he could answer her, she rose hastily up, as if ashamed of her weakness.

“Come,” she said lightly, “I must introduce you to my duenna ; she will think I have outraged the proprieties dreadfully by this long interview. Come with me to the other room. You must share our *al fresco* luncheon now you are here.”

He followed her without a word, feeling more as if he were in a bewildering, beautiful dream than in the actual living presence of this girl. She made him stay with her all the day. She had so much to say and to hear, she declared, that she could not part with him, and at last, when all other topics had been exhausted, he began to speak of Raoul. He had not heard from him, he said, for nearly a year. He had written several times, but he feared that, as Raoul had been so constantly changing his address, the letters could not have been received.

“And it is not as if I were stationary either,” he went on ; “I have been a wanderer also, and so I suppose, if he has written to me, I have lost the chance of getting them. These foreign postal regulations are so bad. If one leaves a place, they never will forward your letters properly.”

“And the countess—do you know anything of her ?” asked Vivienne—her heart beating fast and quick at the bare mention of Raoul's name.

“No ; Raoul has never mentioned her, and I fancied the subject was painful to him. Ah, Vivienne, he has been cruelly wronged ! What would I not give to see him back at Renonçeux again !”

“Do you think that will be possible ?” said Vivienne, trying

to calm her trembling voice, and only succeeding in making it constrained and cold by the effort.

"Who can tell?" said Albert sadly. "He has suffered great injustice. Perhaps, after all, the wrong may right itself in time: stranger things have happened."

Then they were both silent. The shadows of those old days fell on them, and with them other memories wakened, of which neither cared to speak.

When night fell, and Albert Hoffmann returned to the city, he went back with a richer, deeper gladness in his heart than he had known through all these weary months of trial and failure. But he went back also with the knowledge that his love for Vivienne was increased a thousandfold—that the very sight of her face had brought back again the old madness—the old pain.

CHAPTER III.

THE LAST SEAL.

"The love where Death has set his seal,
Nor age can chill, nor rival steal,
Nor falsehood disavow."

THE Villa d'Alfieri in Naples was brilliant with lights. A fête was being held there by the beautiful French countess who had lately arrived, and about whose loveliness and wealth rumour had been busy ever since.

The fête was gorgeous — magnificent — eclipsing anything Naples had seen for long years past. The grounds were illuminated; fairylike pavilions rose here and there; fountains threw up their showers of silver spray, and caught all the glowing hues of coloured stars and gleaming lamps, which hung among the trees like the enchanted fruit of Eastern fables. The far-off swell of music, the chiming melody of women's laughter, the mystery of intrigue, romance, and pleasure—all mingled there in the brilliance and enchantment of the scene; the pure stars above looked down on light that mocked their own; the faint breeze stirred the foliage, and swept over the dewy orange-boughs, and caught the amorous whispers of the night on its wings, and bore them far away to its own fair home in the south. The flying hours were crowned with every fanciful and costly device that pleasure could invent, and gold secure; and the Countess de Verdreuil, standing amidst her guests, the loveliest of all the lovely women there, felt her heart swell with triumph and delight as the murmurs of admiration and wonder

fell on her ear from the crowd she had gathered to grace her fête.

It was verging upon midnight.

The sounds of festivity rose and fell upon the air; sweet strains of music burst ever and anon from some concealed nook in the grounds around. The full, lustrous moonlight flooded lawn and terrace, trees and shrubs, with its radiance. Here and there, where the shadows slept in some dark, leafy nook, was the white gleam of a statue, or the graceful form of a dancing-god poised on its airy pedestal. The fragrance of orange-flowers, of myrtles and roses, dew-steeped and odorous, filled the air with their sweetness. Even from without the garden-walls and ornamented gates, enough could be heard and seen to tell of the brilliant revelry, the marvellous beauty, the gay and graceful mirth, of the scene within.

In a shadowy, leafy nook of the illuminated grounds, the faint sparkle of a lamp among the foliage falling on her face, the gleam of the moonlight resting on the hues of her trailing dress, sat Blanche de Verdreuil. She was alone; she had just dismissed her attendant cavalier on some slight errand, and was awaiting his return. It was the first moment of solitude she had known; and as she leant carelessly back on her seat, her eyes wandered over the brilliant scene, and a smile of triumph rose to her lips.

Suddenly she started to her feet as though a serpent had stung her; pale, breathless, terrified, her eyes glanced in wild and fearful alarm from side to side. What was that she had heard as she rested in her seat? Was it fancy? Was it reality? Was it only her own guilty fear that had conjured it up?

Two words had floated to her with the sighing of the wind, the tremulous murmurs of the parted leaves. Two words!

Yet her heart seemed to stand still with horror; her very limbs seemed frozen and powerless. She stood there with the wild, despairing look of some hunted animal driven at last to bay, and as she stood and as she gazed, the whisper came to her again, "*Blanche Lecroix!*"

Who said it? Who knew it? Out from the leafy shadows of the shrubbery before her two figures came; one, *her husband*—the other, Raoul de Verdreuil!

"*Not dead! not dead!*" she gasped, as her white lips parted in agony, and her hands clenched the woodwork of the seat. Then she turned and fled like one possessed—her shrill screams startling the assembled guests, and bringing them in throngs around her.

"Take me away!" she shrieked in her frantic terror, "take me away! Oh, God! that I might die to-night!"

* * * * *

An hour afterwards the villa was dark and quiet ; the lights were extinguished, the guests had left ; no sign of the recent revelry, the brilliant festivity, could be found now in the hushed silence, the darkened rooms.

In a lighted chamber within, a woman crouched over the blaze of a bright wood fire. Its warmth seemed to bring neither heat nor life back to the chill torpor of her frame, for she shivered and trembled from time to time as if with deadly cold, and her eyes glanced from side to side in the wildest terror and alarm. She had dismissed her attendants when her guests had left; declaring she had only been alarmed by the sudden appearance of a man in the shrubberies, who had sprung out and accosted her ; and though many wondered why this incident should have caused her such extreme terror as to unfit her for the continuance of the fête, they kept the wonder to themselves, and accepted her excuses with extreme courtesy and apparent belief.

And now she was alone—alone in her chamber, with the costly glitter of her rich apparelling thrown on the floor beside her, while with locked doors and curtained windows she crouched by the fire in the cold, numb terror of her fear, fear of what the morrow would bring forth, when the world she had fooled and cheated so long, would know her as she was. Every shadow on the wall, every fall of the ashes in the grate, startled her afresh. The room seemed filled with spectres of the past, with horrors and memories innumerable. All the security and safety on which she had prided herself so short a time before had been but a plank, whose frail foothold had refused to support her, whose strength had given way when least expected, and plunged her into the boiling, seething waters of destruction below.

Flight was useless now—disguise unavailing. The sea would not hold her avenger ; death would not keep him from his purpose : nay, worse than all, the very man of all others whom she had feared his meeting, was with him now. Together their plans were laid ; together their vengeance would be taken. She had wronged them both so basely and treacherously ; what mercy could she expect from them now ? None ! none !

She felt paralyzed with this thought, Its vague, shapeless horror had taken form and life at last, and she was powerless to meet or avert it. The law she had outraged, the justice she had mocked, the strange destiny which, in the moment of her proudest triumphs, had brought her face to face with the guilt of her earliest youth—all these terrified her now as spectres of a life long given to infamy and sin. And while the time sped by, and the hours softly chimed their flight to her heedless ears, she felt her own deeds, and the merciless retribution she had herself courted so long, enfolding her in a poisonous net from which

there was no escape, whose folds were stifling her, and crushing her even now.

"I cannot avert it!" she cried wildly and passionately. "Oh, what mad impulse made me come here to the very spot, the very place where *he* awaited me? The sea gives up its victims, the grave its dead, to avenge *my sins*. Oh, God! is there no escape?—no escape?"

She paced her room with restless steps; her hands pressed tight against her aching breast, her beautiful hair tossed wildly from her face; her whole expression agonized, despairing as that of a creature lost, forsaken, desolate.

Ah! Blanche de Verdreuil tasted the full bitterness of her wrong-doing in this hour. The dead-sea fruit she had gathered through her life was now dust and ashes in her mouth. She had none to whom she could turn for comfort or consolation. She had never known tenderness, nor pity, and none would yield her in her hour of need what she had too often despised in her hours of triumph.

Yet as she moved to and fro in her restless, feverish walk through the length of her lighted chamber, a thought struck her. She started, paused, and then she laughed aloud—a cruel, mocking, triumphant laugh, that rang through the stillness of the night, and startled the echoes around with its strange, unmirthful sound.

"Oh, fool! to think my power is gone when I have *that*!" she cried aloud. "At least I shall know the sweetness of revenge!"

On her face, as the lamp-rays fell upon it, there gleamed the cruel, unsparing hate of a woman when she has killed all softness in her nature—all purity in her soul—all pity and remorse for herself as well as others.

She swept across the room with the old haughty grace of movement, and went over to an ebony casket, richly carved and chased, that stood on her dressing-table. Opening it with a key of strange and curious workmanship, she took from thence a packet of papers, and commenced to read them slowly and carefully over; then she folded them together, sealed and addressed them, and, going over to her *escritoire*, sat down and commenced to write. For some moments her pen moved rapidly over the paper, and the light, as it fell on her face, lit up the smile on her lips, the merciless gleam in her eyes, both cruel with the cruelty that men never know—the cruelty of a lost woman's hatred.

She threw down her pen at last, and placed what she had written with the packet she had taken from the casket; then locked them all up again.

"Now let him do his worst," she said; "at least he will gain nothing by it; and I, though I lose all, I have vengeance for the loss."

Then she left the casket on her table, and went slowly back to her seat by the fire. Involuntarily she glanced at herself as she passed her mirror, and the sight of her face horrified her. All its beauty seemed to have withered and faded away before the agony of these last few hours. The icy hand of terror had changed all its warmth and colour into the greyness and hardness of age. She shuddered as she looked at it, and then threw herself on her couch, with her face pressed down on the pillows and her hands still clasped against her heart, as though every beat and throb were agony to her now.

"Oh ! for sleep—for rest !" she muttered wildly, as she lay there in solitude and pain. "How my eyes burn and my brain throbs ! Will nothing rob me of memory ? will nothing give me peace ?"

She groaned aloud as she spoke. Indeed, for once, Blanche de Verdreuil suffered keener torture than ever she had inflicted on others. Then suddenly she sprang from her recumbent attitude, and went to her dressing-table once more. A dainty inlaid dressing-case stood there, and, hastily unlocking it, she drew out a small cut-glass bottle, containing some thick dark liquid. With trembling hands she unloosed the stopper, and poured some of its contents into a glass, without any attempt at measurement. This she drank hastily off, and, replacing the bottle in its case—*without locking it again*—she returned to her couch, and once more threw herself down to rest.

Gradually the lulling effect of the opiate she had taken began to appear. Her eyes closed wearily and heavily ; her hands fell by her side. The weary, agonized look left her face, and sleep seemed to seal her features into peace and beauty once again.

Slowly the moments passed ; slowly the hours chimed the flight of time in the hushed stillness of the room where she lay. The world without grew flushed and rosy with the warmth and beauty of the early day. One faint ray of sunlight stole softly through the curtained windows, and flitted across the shadowy gloom, till it shone over the couch where the sleeper lay—so calm, so tranquil now !

How still and white she was ! The sunbeam kissed her lips, and fluttered over the golden waves of her hair, and rested softly on the closed eyelids whose veiling lashes swept the marble whiteness of her cheeks. But its gentle warmth never seemed to bring the rose-bloom back to the face, or the rich crimson hues to the parted lips, or penetrate the dreamless rest of the motionless figure.

Ah, no ! for never again could sunbeam's warmth or daylight's glow awaken that sleeper from her rest. It was endless, eternal, now !

The day grew later. The fuller rays of sunlight bathed the

world in mellow radiance, and wakened men to toil and labour and sorrow once again. The birds sang of the summer's glory in the trees without ; the fountains rose and fell with their plashing music ; but in the marble basins of the garden, the tiny gold and silver fish looked in vain for their morning meal, for their mistress still lay in her darkened room, sleeping that strange, deep sleep, wrapped in that motionless calm.

Richer and fuller grew the beauty of the day. Heat and warmth brooded over the distant hills, and glistened on the smiling waters of the bay ; the flowers drooped ; the birds sang more softly ; the music of the fountains grew more audible in the stillness ; and the owner of all this beauty lay still in the shadowy silence of that chamber within—her eyes blind to the sunlight—her ears deaf to the music of the singing-birds—her heart pulseless and still for evermore.

Her life was ended !

So they found her at last, when the wonder of her long silence at last gave her household courage to break into her room unsummoned. Then the horror of discovery filled the dark and silent chamber where she lay, and terrified faces gazed at her, and hushed voices carried the news from one to the other of her many attendants, and within and without the Villa d'Alfieri there was but one whisper floating throughout the day,—"*She is dead !*"

They covered the white, still face ; they closed the half-opened lids of the once beautiful eyes that had now no beauty ; and so they left her to the darkness and the solitude of her dreamless rest—to the sleep that knows no earthly waking.

CHAPTER IV.

"VENGEANCE IS MINE."

"Come away, for life and thought
Here no longer dwell."

Tennyson.

THROUGHOUT the day Naples had but one topic of conversation—the sudden and mysterious death of the French countess at the Villa d'Alfieri.

Was it suicide ? was it accidental ? Rumours of every description were floating through the town. The authorities looked grave as they returned from their investigation ; the medical men made their examination and inquiries, and shook their heads

and said—nothing. Finally, when excitement and wonder were at their height, a new sensation was created by the appearance of two strangers—one of whom gave the name of the Count de Verdreuil, secretary to the French Legation—the other, strange to say, was the very individual who was supposed to have lost his life in the bay a short time before. Naples had gossip enough on which to regale itself, when all these incidents came crowding together one after another, and good use it made of its opportunities for the time being.

It was a relief, however, to the disorganized household at the Villa d'Alfieri when Raoul de Verdreuil calmly announced his right of authority, and took all the management of affairs into his own hands. He saw the municipal authorities; he received the doctors after the examination was over; he interrogated the frightened servants, and finally, from their voluble and incoherent bursts of information, arrived at all the facts bearing on Blanche de Verdreuil's death. The cause was evident enough. The unlocked case, the emptied glass, the dark stain on the lips of the lifeless corpse—all told how the end had come—but, whether self-sought or accidental, who could determine?

The countess's own maid declared that her mistress was frequently accustomed to take sleeping-draughts. She had herself administered them on several occasions. On this particular night, her mistress had seemed terribly excited and nervous. She declared she had been frightened by some one in the gardens during her fête, and, indeed, had looked so ill that the girl had begged permission to remain with her during the night. This, however, madame had imperatively refused, declaring she only required rest, and that if she did not feel well during the night, she would ring. The girl had, however, slept in an adjoining room, to be near if anything was needed, for she felt really uneasy at the wild looks and excited manner of her mistress. She had listened several times at the door; but, all seemed quiet, and receiving no summons, she went to sleep at last herself, and did not wake till very late. She went immediately to her mistress's room, and knocked softly for admission. There was no answer, and, fancying the countess must be asleep, she did not like to repeat her knock, but came back again in half an hour and tried to open the door; she found it locked, and then, as her summons for admission was still unanswered, she grew alarmed, and called some of the other servants. All attempts to waken the countess or enter the room proved unavailing, yet none of them liked to force open the door; at last one of the men suggested an entrance by the window, and this was at last effected. He found his mistress lying on her couch, still partially dressed, as her maid had left her the previous night; and when he opened the door and the other members of the household came rushing in, there

was no doubt about their lady being dead. She was perfectly cold ; she must have been dead for hours, they thought.

As no further information could be obtained, Raoul set himself to work to hush up any scandal on the subject. This woman had borne his father's name ; the world knew her only as his wife ; and, now that she was dead, he dreaded to have all the infamy and degradation of her life made known to it.

It was true he had come prepared to confront her with her guilt—to take from her the honours and possessions of which she had robbed him—but even that he had of late determined to do with as little publicity and as much avoidance of open scandal as was compatible with the requirements of justice. The wrongs she had committed against him were, after all, not half so great as those for which Carlo Viotti had suffered so long and so deeply, and he had vested all power of retribution in the person of the husband she had so wantonly forsaken, so basely deceived in years gone by.

The inheritance of his father's was his ; she could not withstand the might of avenging justice ; if she yielded it up to him quietly and at once, he had determined to keep her secret from the world—to give her such provision as should insure her comfort for the rest of her life, and leave the punishment of her crimes in the hands of the only man to whom it of right belonged. And when he came to tell her this, when the whole fabric of plans carefully matured, of proofs patiently gathered, of knowledge slowly and skilfully acquired, were woven into the one perfect whole of a just retribution, he found the work had been taken from his hands—that all his plans and purposes had been frustrated by a will stronger than his own, and his carefully-laid schemes were swept away before his eyes on the current of a great, mysterious power, even as a river sweeps away a leaf it has caught in the rush of its mighty waters.

It was a lesson that he had much need to learn—a lesson he could never forget in all his life again, for it showed him the littleness of human will and human purpose ; it brought him face to face with the great teachings of death, and, above all, it smote his heart with a terrible self-reproach that this tragic end of a life in the midst of life might be in some measure due to him—that the guilty, hunted woman, on whom he had once sworn to be avenged, had chosen death rather than his accusations, or her husband's retribution.

Retribution ! Ah, when shall we who use that word for our own petty ends, our own vindictive or revengeful purposes, learn that it is God's weapon of justice—not man's ?

So Raoul de Verdreuil, by right of his relationship to the deceased, took all the management of her affairs upon his own

shoulders. The necessary inquiries were skilfully and carefully conducted ; all unnecessary publicity was avoided ; and as, by the evidence of her maid, the countess had seemed to be labouring under some strong mental excitement on the night of her death, and was also proved to be in the habit of resorting to opiates under all such circumstances, there was little apparent doubt in the minds of the investigators that it was purely accidental. The countess had evidently taken an overdose of her accustomed draught, and the result was—death !

That she could have wilfully made away with her life seemed an utter impossibility. A woman, young, beautiful, wealthy, gifted with every possible good and every worldly advantage her heart could desire—to suppose that such a woman would voluntarily destroy herself in the very zenith of her beauty and celebrity was quite incredible. So it came to pass that a verdict of “Accidental Death” was returned ; and while her strange fate was read and commented upon in every circle where she had shone and triumphed—in every city where she had stayed and made herself notorious by her loveliness, her extravagance, her rank—none knew or imagined that she had no title to that rank, no right to that wealth, no honour, truth, or virtue with that beauty.

The world never guessed how skilfully she had cheated it ; that secret was laid with her in her grave by the two men who of all others had suffered most deeply for its shame and unscrupulous wrong-doing.

It was Raoul's wish, and Viotti obeyed it as he would have obeyed the lightest word of the man to whom he yielded the most loyal fidelity and love. So Blanche de Verdreuil was buried with all honour and respect ; her name shielded, her honour saved, by the very man she had deemed most merciless.

Half the wealth and rank of Naples attended the funeral of the ill-fated countess, and the death which science pronounced “accidental” drew down much sympathy and loudly-expressed regret from all quarters.

“So young ! so beautiful ! so rich !” people said to one another, “and then to die so suddenly and fearfully amidst such blessings as these ! Ah, it was indeed terrible !”

And if they had known *how* terrible that end had been—if any human eye had seen the horror and dread of her last moments—they would have shuddered still more ; they would have acknowledged it was worse even than they deemed it. But only one Eye had witnessed that terrible conflict, only one Presence had been there when that guilty soul had winged its flight from earth, and to Him alone could her account be rendered now. And when the grave had closed on her, and the sins and sorrows of

life were a sealed book henceforward, the husband she had betrayed, the man she had wronged, stood bare-headed beside her last resting-place, and murmured, with heartfelt sincerity, at last, "I forgive!"

CHAPTER V

MORE CLOUDS IN THE SKY.

"Her deeds yet live; the worst is yet to come;
But let your sleep for this one night be sound."

"AND you will go back to Renonçeux once more, signor?"

Viotti asked this question as he and Raoul were slowly pacing the grounds of the Villa d'Alfieri on the evening of the day when Blanche de Verdreuil had been buried.

"Yes," Raoul answered quietly. "I suppose she has made no will; if she has, it will be of no use; probably she knew that, and never attempted it."

Viotti looked at him a moment silently, as if debating some question in his own mind that he did not care to ask. At last he said hesitatingly,—

"Signor, pardon me, but I cannot help seeing there is some trouble on your mind still. All is not satisfactory yet. Is it any new trouble connected with *her*, or am I asking what I have no right to know?"

Raoul did not answer him immediately; he looked troubled, strangely troubled for one who had now accomplished the long-sought desires of his heart—who had won back his rich inheritance—who stood high in men's honour and the world's praise.

"I have a trouble," he said slowly at last, "and one that perplexes me exceedingly. But I do not know how you can help me, Viotti, even if I tell you."

"Ah, monseigneur!" cried Viotti impetuously, "is there aught in the world I would not do for you? The debt of a deathless gratitude is still mine. I would serve you with my life, my liberty, my all, if only you desire it."

"Yes, Viotti, I know," said Raoul gently. "But this is a matter in which interference is almost impossible. The truth is that some years ago Blanche de Verdreuil—for so we will still call her—adopted a young girl and introduced her to society as her ward: she lived with her, and was received by the world with all honour and respect. When I left Renonçeux, after my father's death, this young lady was still an inmate of the château;

I have heard no word of her since. I thought she was still living with her guardian, but she is not here ; nor from any of the attendants, not even the countess's own maid, can I ascertain anything bearing on her present life, position, or history. This seems to me very singular, to say the least of it. The girl was too beautiful and too gifted not to create a sensation wherever she appeared, and her fate seems now an unaccountable mystery."

"Perhaps she is married," suggested Viotti. "How long is it since you have heard anything about her?"

"Not since I turned my back on France," said Raoul. "The fault may be mine ; I never inquired about her till now ; but still I cannot think your suggestion correct. Probable enough it is ; but if she had married, I should have certainly heard of it."

"You don't think that *she*, that Blanche, has ill-used the girl in any way ?" said Viotti in a low voice, troubled and grave as his face.

"God forbid !" said Raoul. "I believe in my heart she was jealous of her always, but still I cannot imagine she would have done anything cruel to one so young and friendless, so thoroughly dependent on her, as Mademoiselle St. Maurice was."

"Mademoiselle St. Maurice—is that her name !" inquired Viotti.

"Yes ; but there was always a mystery about this girl ; no one knew exactly who she was, and the countess took very good care no one should. But I believe," he added hesitatingly, "that my friend, Albert Hoffmann, about whom I have spoken to you before, Viotti, was deeply attached to Mademoiselle St. Maurice ; in fact, I thought, when last I left Renonçeux, that they would be married ere long. Now it is strange that he has mentioned nothing whatever about her in any of his letters ; *he* at least ought to know something. That is one reason why I still expected to find her living with Blanche de Verdreuil."

"But you have not heard from your friend for a long time—more than nine months, you said : many things may have happened in that time. Perhaps they are married, and so engrossed with each other that they have no thought of any one else. Under such circumstances time passes marvellously quick ; we scarcely note the lapse of months *then*, monseigneur."

Raoul flushed ; a strange pain shot through his heart at these words. He had deemed his love long conquered, a thing of the past, a dream never to be realized ; but when he thought of Vivienne, the memory of her power, the memory of his own weakness, were all present again. Love ! how often he had told himself it was never for him ; but he had scorned it all his life only to find it at last, when too late.

Love ! he thought of it now with a fierce, wild regret that

was in itself a passion ; it could never live in his life again ; he told himself that so often—oh, so often !—and yet the telling brought no belief, nor any cessation to his pain.

“ Could it be that she was wedded to his friend ere this ? ” he asked himself, as he pondered over Viotti’s last words. “ It might be, it was all too probable ; and in the joy and sweetness of their happy love he was forgotten.”

The thought was bitter beyond all bitterness, and yet he had long deemed his own feelings conquered and subdued. But to think of her he loved as a wife—to imagine her happy, blessed—the idol of a husband’s heart, the sunshine of a husband’s home—was a thing he had not yet realized.

“ I scarcely think my friend would marry and not let me know,” he said at length. “ But you see, Viotti, I have been such a wanderer lately, that letters may have missed me ; and, again, I have not written to him since I found out the mystery of this unhappy woman. I could not bear to tell him anything about it until I knew I was really in possession of my own again. He has not been stationary either, and so I suppose we have both been waiting and wondering why letters don’t come, and all the time the letters are lying in some out-of-the-way post-office to be claimed. I once found a letter for me in the Tyrol district a year after I had left the place. Doubtless some of Albert’s are now sharing the same fate.”

“ I see nothing for it but to make inquiries at Renonçeux,” said Viotti quietly. “ You have nothing of sufficient importance to keep you here, when all this sad business is settled. Have you looked over Blanche’s papers, though ? They may contain some information.”

“ Not all—only such as the authorities deemed relative to a will. But there were nothing but letters and accounts in her *escritoire* and desk, and none of the letters related to Made-moiselle St. Maurice.”

“ But at Renonçeux surely there will be some chance of obtaining information. It is merely a question of time.”

“ Yes, that is true ! I think by to-morrow night we might manage to leave, Viotti.”

“ Certainly we might, or at least you might, *monseigneur*. You do not, of course, need my presence in your home.”

“ What nonsense is this ? Of course I need it, and your assistance as well. Are you going to forsake me in my prosperity, Viotti ? ”

“ Oh, *monseigneur* ! you know that is impossible. But for you, what would I be now ? Yet you will not need me any longer, and I have no right to expect that your home is always to be my shelter.”

“ But I mean it to be so as long as ever you care to accept it,

Carlo," said Raoul gently. "You have proved yourself deserving of my trust—ay, and of my friendship too. They are never taken back when once bestowed."

"Oh, signor! signor!" cried Viotti passionately, as he clasped Raoul's hands with all the enthusiastic warmth, the mobile emotion of his nation and his temperament, "how can you speak so to me? What have I done to deserve such honour? If you had killed instead of rescuing me, it would have been but just; even then I should have been too gently dealt with."

The grateful, incoherent words were sweet to Raoul's ears. This life he had rescued was now a noble and a useful one, and yet it ever rendered him the passive obedience, the grateful love, the reverent worship of a child. It gave him full recompense for many other sorrows, for many weary hours, for all the trials and anxieties now so suddenly ended. This man was at least no time-server. He reversed all the creeds of the world by the very offer he had just made. He had served and clung to Raoul most faithfully in the hour of his adversity and need. When fortune and prosperity were once more restored, he would have withdrawn from him at once, as though he was no longer a friend, but an intruder.

Raoul turned to him and smiled—that grave, rare smile the Italian loved so well,—

"Ah, Viotti! whatever debt you owed me in the past you have more than repaid now. Let me hear no more of gratitude. At least it has brought *her* a fearful recompense for her life's long sin."

The dark, southern face grew strangely pale, the eyes sank before Raoul's pitying gaze.

"There again you saved me," he murmured faintly. "How mad I was with passion and revenge only a week ago! Now—"

"Now the work is taken from our hands," said Raoul softly and reverently, as he glanced up at the dark, clear blue of the cloudless sky; "now we both know how grand a justice is that which proclaims aloud, 'Vengeance is mine!'"

Viotti gazed wonderingly at Raoul de Verdreuil. The grave, earnest face had a new nobility, a deeper meaning now, for Raoul had learnt a lesson by the death-bed of the woman who had wronged him that could never be effaced or forgotten in all his life again.

He had come to Naples to meet Viotti. All proofs of that marriage with Blanche Lecroix had disappeared; the little village was now a town; the church had been altered and enlarged almost beyond recognition; the priest was dead, and none could find the register which bore the date of that one

special entry. Still Viotti did not despair. He remembered, when he received that strange summons to Capri, that he had taken with him a large leathern pocket-book, which contained, among other papers, a copy of this marriage entry. While in Capri he had lost the book, and never missed it till long after he had left the little village.

It occurred to him that this pocket-book might have been found and preserved. The simple-minded fisher-folk were too honest not to guard anything so found, in case of a claimant appearing.

With this hope, therefore, he had gone to Naples, and spent most of his time in sailing backwards and forwards from thence to Capri, while he made investigations about his lost property. His search had for long been a fruitless and profitless one. Then came the accident by which he was supposed to have met his death, and for weeks he stayed on at Capri, suffering so severely from the shock he had received, and all the previous excitement and fatigue he had undergone, that his life was really in danger. When he rallied, it was to hear that the guilty woman who had fled from him to shame and infamy, in the years of her youth, was now actually living at Naples, rejoicing in all the frivolity and extravagance of a life she had lately denied herself from fear alone. This information, and his subsequent sight of her in the privacy of her luxurious home, inflamed Viotti's worst passions and fiercest instincts over again. Scarcely could he bring himself to await Raoul's arrival. He longed to face this beautiful traitress himself, to confront her with her guilt, her infamy, her shame ; but his promise to Raoul withheld him, and he waited still.

He kept away from Naples. He knew that the report of his death must have drawn Blanche there, and he resolved to let her remain still in the false security of that belief until such time as Raoul de Verdreuil wished.

Meanwhile a strange and unexpected chance brought into his hands the very proofs for which he had sought and searched so long.

He was sitting one day in the little cabin of the fisherman who had saved his life, meditating on the difficulties which had so retarded his efforts at discovery. As he sat and as he thought, a sudden noise and crash as of a heavy fall startled him from his abstraction. Springing to his feet, in order to ascertain the cause of this confusion, he forced his way into the inner room of the cabin, and there a scene of mingled disorder and noise greeted his eyes and ears. The two eldest children of his fisher friends had been employing themselves, in the absence of their parents, by climbing up to the top of a large chest which stood in one corner of the room. Whether the chest—which was a

family heirloom—had begun to feel the effects of age, or whether the weight of the children had been too great for it, no one could tell ; but certain it was that the lid had given way, and, when Viotti appeared in the doorway, one of the boys had disappeared in the interior, and was shouting and struggling lustily to get out from his unexpected prison. His brother, alarmed at the catastrophe, was trying with all his puny strength to rescue the little captive, but with such success that he overturned the chest entirely, and it fell with a heavy crash to the ground !

The noise of splintered wood, the dust and mildew of years, which had accumulated both in the box and its contents, and the cries of the frightened children—all made a scene of hopeless confusion for the moment ; and as Viotti, half laughing, half angered with the mischievous urchins, helped them out of their predicament, and began to examine into the amount of damage they had done, he saw lying amidst the *débris* of broken wood, mildewed linen, and quaint ornaments, which the chest had contained, an old leather pocket-book, the first glimpse of whose shabby cover and tarnished clasps seemed strangely familiar. Hastily he seized it and glanced at its contents. Yellow and seared were the pages and the papers it contained ; but the first look convinced Viotti that his long-lost property was once more in his possession, restored by one of those strange accidents which men attribute to chance for want of a better agent. Once convinced of it being his own, he lost no time in claiming it from its present owners, and he then ascertained that the wife of the Caprian had found it years before, when she was quite a child, lying on the beach by the fisher-boats. She had brought it home and given it to her mother, and, as neither of them could read, the book was consigned to the old chest, and there it had lain till now.

Overjoyed at this discovery, Viotti lost no time in communicating it to Raoul de Verdreuil, and the news had brought him to Naples with all speed, ready to face his foe and prove her infamy at last.

The proofs of her wrong-doing were now in his possession ; at any moment he could confront her with a weight of evidence sufficient to convince her of her own powerlessness, and the world of her long deceit. But still Raoul was not merciless. Some pang of pity for this woman who had so wronged the dead and the living, still lingered in his heart, and he had resolved to seek her privately, to tell her of his discoveries, and point out the one restitution which lay in her power to make.

On the night of her fête Viotti insisted upon seeking her at last, and Raoul, fearful of his southern passions and his long-restrained anger, dared not let him go alone. Together they had

entered the villa grounds ; together they had watched her reigning in her beauty and sovereignty, queen of the brilliant festivities of the night, and then in a moment of ungovernable fury,

Viotti had broken from Raoul's restraining arm, and confronted her in the sudden silence and solitude of her thoughts, telling all his purpose, proving all her shame, overthrowing all her triumph by those two words which had brought back all the infamy of the past—"Blanche Lecroix !"

* * * * *

That night, after his conversation with Viotti, Raoul de Verdreuil stood, wakeful and silent, by his open window, gazing at the far-off town as it lay clasped in the shadows of the night.

The heat of the day had passed away with the glow of a burning sunset.

Innumerable stars glittered in the sky, and the whole width of the shining waters was touched and lightened by the gleam of moonlight. The soft wind swept lightly over his brow, and its touch seemed to him as a caress of tenderness from some gentle hand. He was happier now than he had been for years ; happy at the thought of his recovered home and his speedy return to it ; happy because once more he could go back in honour to the land he had never forgotten—to the old familiar places he had never loved so well as when he deemed them lost.

How often he had mourned, and thought, and craved for his lost heritage. How often his memory had gone to it, waking or sleeping ; how often in dreams had he trodden the beautiful shadowy aisles of its avenues and woodlands, and felt the sweep of fragrant winds from the leafy depths of its far-off forests ! And now—now the dreams were dreams no longer ; now it was all his own again ; and his heart yearned for it, and his eyes longed for it, as never before had they yearned and longed in all his wanderings and absence.

He had regained his birthright ; it was his own from this day forward, and he bowed his head in reverent homage to the Power that had restored, and the mighty Will that had restrained his own rash hands from polluting his recovered treasure by the baseness of a cruel vengeance such as he had once determined upon taking. That night Raoul de Verdreuil slept in peace and dreamed himself more blessed than he deserved. With the morrow he would awake to the pain and the grief of a new discovery, more fatal to his happiness than any he had yet experienced.

It did not dawn upon him in his new-born peace ; it did not shadow his tranquil slumbers. He slept and dreamt of joy and happiness in the future before him—of all things fair and calm and gentle.

Ah ! it were well if from some dreams men never wakened !

CHAPTER VI.

L O S T !

“Life! what is life? A shadow!
Its breath is but the immediate breath we draw.
Ten thousand accidents for us in ambush lie!”

It was the morning after the funeral at the Villa d'Alfieri. Raoul's time was incessantly occupied; there were still many things to be arranged. The retinue of servants had to be paid and dismissed; the villa given up to the agent who had let it to the countess; the magnificent jewels belonging to her—most of which were hereditary, though many had been gifts of his father—Raoul had determined on taking back with him to Renonçeux. There was no other claimant for them, even supposing that Blanche had held any legal right to their possession; so Raoul ordered them to be carefully packed with his own things, and gave them to the care of his personal attendant, who was to accompany him back to Renonçeux. Everything else—the costly wardrobe, the magnificent dresses, the thousand feminine trifles belonging to the ill-fated woman—he ordered to be sold, and gave over the proceeds to her own maid. Then, with a sigh of relief, he felt he had done all that was necessary, and, deeming himself free from all further responsibility, he ordered the preparations for his departure to be hastened, as he wished, if possible, to leave Naples that night.

It was just noon. Viotti had gone down to the town on business, and Raoul was alone. He wandered through the deserted and dismantled rooms of the villa one after another, thinking still of that strange and sudden termination to the life of its owner, which had made such an impression on him. He came to her own boudoir at last—the dainty, luxurious chamber where her last moments had been spent, and the awful agony of her newly-discovered danger had tortured her to madness. There he paused and glanced sadly around. With a strange unwonted interest he noted the thousand luxuries of art and wealth and beauty—the dainty hangings of lace and azure silk, the Dresden-framed mirrors, the costly sculptures, the inlaid tables, with their graceful trifles of ormolu, and malachite, and ivory, scattered over them. He lingered there with an interest altogether strange and new; feminine luxuries were of small account to Raoul de Verdreuil as a rule;

and while he lingered, his attention was attracted by a small ebony casket, curiously and richly carved, and standing on the dressing-table opposite him. He went over and took it up in his hand, gazing with some curiosity at its quaint and peculiar workmanship. It was locked, but all the keys of the countess were in his possession, and, prompted by a vague feeling of curiosity and interest, he sat down and began to try them, one after the other, in the lock of the casket.

For a long time he was unsuccessful in finding the one that opened it; but at last he did succeed, and, with a faint smile at his own unusual curiosity, he saw the key turn, the lid fly back, and before him lay a packet of papers, sealed and addressed to --himself.

With an exclamation of wonder he drew them out, and saw, to his surprise, the handwriting of Blanche de Verdreuil.

"Strange," he murmured, turning over the packet again and again; "after searching cabinets and desks and escritaires so long, I at last come upon this—written on the night of her death too! What can it be?"

He broke the seal; a letter fell out first. It was addressed to him. He laid the rest of the papers down and began to read it.

As he read, the letters seemed to dance and flame before his eyes. The mockery of all his hopes, the failure of all his dreams, spoke out to him in those few brief lines. Every drop of blood slowly left his face and lips, and the letter fell from his hands and rustled on the floor at his feet.

Then he turned and seized the folded packet which lay beside him. Slowly and steadily he read its contents, his face growing paler, his brow sterner, as one sheet after another was perused and finished.

He laid them down at last and staggered to his feet like a man in a dream. He paced the room with swift, uneven steps—his breath coming and going as though with some inward struggle—some fierce effort at self-command.

The unexpected blow—the blow aimed by Blanche de Verdreuil's last act—had fallen on him with crushing force. He could scarcely realise, scarcely believe in the truth of what her letter contained. The knowledge of loss to be sustained—of wrong unwittingly dealt by him—came home to his heart new-weighted by a sudden fear he scarcely dared to name to himself.

He sat there alone through the burning hours of the summer noon—alone, save for the consciousness of a terrible misery that crept over his senses, that robbed him of calmness and of peace. In that moment Raoul de Verdreuil could have thrown himself down and wept like a woman for the hopes that were lost—for the glory that was dead!

BOOK VII.

CHAPTER I.

A HARD DUTY.

“ I only gain to lose,
And lose to gain.”

RENONCEUX once more !

The setting sun was shedding all its glory on the grey majestic pile, and reddening the painted oriels, and the stately beauty of the château had never seemed so beautiful to Raoul de Verdrenil as now, when, through the bold curve of the park and the winding avenue of trees in the full splendour of their summer foliage, his carriage swept swiftly on and up the familiar drive, to pause at the entrance of his home, after years of absence.

He had been a wanderer half his life—partly from circumstances, partly from love of change ; but he had ever loved Renonçeux above all other places with a great and enduring love, and a certain pride in its great hereditary possessions, not for their worth or splendour so much as their ancestral dignity, their stainless repute, their antique grandeur, stretching back to past centuries, and glorious with past greatness. He leaned forward as the carriage drove swiftly through the arching aisles, and gazed eagerly, yet sadly, at the noble pile before him, all gold and flame-hued where the sun-rays rested, all dark with clustered ivy where the shadows slept.

A few minutes and the young count sprang from the carriage steps, and entered the beautiful vaulted hall, where the dim splendour of the fading day shone through the purple and crimson hues of the many windows, figuring the marble floor with rich and varied colouring. Through lines of servants, bowing and smiling their glad yet respectful welcome, Raoul passed on to the rooms beyond. He was weary with travel—and something more than physical weariness and bodily fatigue shadowed the grave repose of his face, and gave that subdued and sorrowful expression to the eyes which rested so tenderly and regretfully on all around him.

There were none to welcome him save the servitors of his household ; neither friend nor relation to give him greeting on this, his strange and unexpected arrival ; and the irrepressible sadness and melancholy of his face deepened as his loneliness made itself so plainly felt.

"A strange home-coming !" he said to himself ; "and yet not more strange than it should be—to a home that is mine no longer!"

Then he turned and gave a few rapid orders to the house-steward, and went to his own room, where dinner was served soon after.

The young count looked strangely sad and weary as he sat in his lonely splendour, while the sunset warmth of the closing day stole through the open windows, and the fragrant breath of the late roses swept by on the evening breeze.

The servants who waited on him noted and wondered at his strange abstraction, the weary gravity of his face, the almost stern resolve written on every line of his brow. They wondered still more when, at the conclusion of the meal, he gave orders that the whole of his household and tenantry were to assemble in the great hall by nine o'clock ; he wished to speak to them there.

Many wondered what this strange summons meant, as they bore it from one to the other of the tenantry of Renonçeux. Far and wide the news spread that their young lord had returned to his own possessions—that his heritage had been restored to him again—and, while curiosity and interest were rife as to his sudden return, and his unexpected orders, the young count himself sat in sad and earnest thought, awaiting their arrival.

* * *

It was night at Renonçeux. The great hall was crowded with a respectful and wondering assembly, all eager to know for what reason this summons had been issued—why their lord had desired their presence.

As the hour of nine struck, Raoul de Verdreuil left his solitary room and came there to meet them ; a faint, low murmur of welcome greeted him. Of all that concourse, there was not one man or woman who did not in their hearts rejoice that the old name and the old heritage were again in the keeping of the last of that honoured race, whose strange and unaccountable banishment had so long perplexed and grieved them.

Their young lord had returned to his own, and gladly and warmly they welcomed him.

But Raoul, as he stood before them in the full blaze and colour of the lighted hall, did not look like a man in possession of a restored and noble heritage. The grave, saddened face wore no triumph, nor even gladness. He looked like a man borne down by adverse fate, and troubled with many perplexities, not as they had thought he would look—glad, content, triumphant. He

bowed to them with the grave and courteous grace so entirely his own, and then, in the hushed and perfect stillness around, his voice sounded—tranquil, passionless, distinct.

“I have sent for you here because I have a duty to perform which it is incumbent on me to fulfil without delay. I stand before you here to-night in order to disabuse your minds of the idea you have naturally formed. You think I am your lord, that Renonçeux is mine, even as it was my father’s; that you owe me allegiance, duty, service—do you not?”

A faint murmur of assent ran through the crowd.

“It is a very natural mistake,” he resumed, still speaking in the same unmoved, tranquil voice—“a mistake which I myself believed in till a few days ago. Well, then, I have come to tell you that I am not the lord of Renonçeux! I have, in fact, no more right or claim to the château and estates than any of you!”

He paused again, looking round at the amazed and startled faces with a grave, sad regret. Then he resumed his explanation,—

“A sad mistake has originated—a mistake which you will regret as much as I do, when you hear of it—a mistake which my hands must rectify without delay. There are some among you, doubtless, who remember my father’s elder brother, Count Maurice de Verdreuil. To me, of course, his name is only a name. I have no memory of him. My father has often told me the story of his banishment, because of his political difference with the Government, and his exertions on behalf of the Bourbon family. His exile was to last for ten years, and he left France in bitterness of spirit at what he termed the injustice and ingratitude of his country. While in Italy he contracted a secret marriage, which no one ever suspected or heard of. His wife died in giving birth to a child—a daughter; and my uncle about the same time heard of his own father’s sudden death here at Renonçeux, and that, on the term of his banishment being concluded, he became the owner of the estates and château, as the eldest son. Now comes a portion of the story which I can only fill up from conjecture. My uncle made a will, leaving all his possessions to his daughter—then, of course, a mere infant. He had full power to do this, Renonçeux not being entailed, but always descending to heirs direct, both male and female. However, he remembered his brother was also married, and had a son—myself. It occurred to him that he would like to see him, and for this purpose he wrote to my father and requested him to come over to Italy, as he was still serving out the term of his banishment, and unable to return to France. He appointed a place for this meeting, and, leaving his child at Bologna with her nurse, he set out on his journey.

“That meeting never took place. While waiting for my father’s arrival, he met his death by drowning, during a sudden

squall that overtook him while boating on the lake of Como. My father arrived only in time to hear of his death and identify him as his brother. The secret of his marriage never transpired. The nurse in whose care the child was left only knew him by his assumed name, for, from the moment he left France, he dropped his rank and title, and called himself only Monsieur St. Maurice. The faithful servant was the sole protector of the child's infant years ; she deemed her father had deserted her. She had no proofs of the marriage, they having been in Monsieur St. Maurice's possession, and he placed them with the will he had made in the secret drawer of an old-fashioned desk belonging to his wife. This desk and a ring belonging to her mother were the sole inheritance of the orphan child, and as such were carefully kept and guarded for her by her nurse, Manon Beauvoir !”

“Manon Beauvoir !” fell from the lips of the astonished listeners.

“Yes !” said Raoul quietly. “No doubt you are astonished ; you can trace out the rest of the story easily enough now. The rightful heiress of Renonçeux is the adopted child of the faithful old woman who lived for so long in this very place, totally ignorant of her nursling's history and her rights. The ward of the Countess de Verdreuil, who lived at Renonçeux after Manon Beauvoir's death—the young and beautiful girl whom we all know as Mademoiselle St. Maurice—I can now prove to be the heiress of Renonçeux, the daughter of my uncle, Count Maurice—your châtelaine henceforward—Vivienne de Verdreuil !”

A total silence followed these words ; unqualified amazement was the only feeling prevailing over the astonished listeners. They looked at the calm, noble face of the man before them—he who was no longer lord of Renonçeux by right of this strange discovery, and yet whom they loved and revered so dearly—whom they would have received so gladly in his father's place.

Then one from among the circle of the tenantry stepped forward with a low bow.

“My lord,” he said, “that this is true we can scarcely doubt, since we have your word for it. But it goes hard with us to see you banished again, even though the cause is a just one now. We had hoped to have you among us henceforward.”

Raoul smiled a little sadly.

“You cannot have hoped it more fondly than I did,” he answered, “but justice ordains it otherwise. Your new mistress will be all you can desire—of that I feel certain—and I am thankful it is in my power to make amends for the wrong we have unwittingly done her all these years. I have a few words more to say ere I dismiss you. I cannot ascertain how or why

Mademoiselle de Verdreuil left Renonçeux so abruptly after the death of my father. The housekeeper told me a strange tale which the countess appears to have invented as the ostensible reason for her ward's flight from here. I cannot and do not believe that the young lady would have done anything dishonourable, nor do I credit this story of an elopement, of which I only heard a few hours ago. However, her unaccountable disappearance has complicated matters considerably, for I have now to find out where she has fled and for what reason."

Then he paused, while the blood rushed in a hot flush over his features, till then so grave and impassive.

"If wrong has been done, it remains for me to discover and right it. I have no more to say—save that I ask of your love all the loyalty and respect for your new mistress which my race have ever received—all the generous fealty you would have rendered me had I come to reign here in honour once again."

A low murmur ran throughout the listening crowd.

Raoul smiled tenderly at the sorrowful, perplexed faces on which he might never look again.

"My friends," he answered them, "what is right is seldom pleasant; Justice is a stern taskmaster; but your love and your fidelity are very precious to me, and I shall never forget you—be sure of that; and now—farewell!"

They crowded round him—tearful, sorrowful—pained at those words which seemed to speak an eternal parting. And then with a few kindly words to each, a warm hand-clasp to all, Raoul de Verdreuil dismissed them, and stood alone in the great vaulted hall, listening to the echo of their footsteps, the murmur of their voices, as they died away in the distance.

He had done his duty, he had avenged injustice, he had obeyed the wishes of the dead, so soon as ever those wishes were known to him. He had laid down all rights, all claims for ever, but now he felt for the first time the sharp pang of regret smite him as he looked around on all he must leave for ever—the birthright which was no birthright—the heritage which was no heritage—the name hallowed by every memory of childhood, endeared by the pride and lofty honour of a past ancestry, which yet never had been his home by right. All must be given up!

A hard duty lay before him, yet he must not shrink from it. On the morrow the search for the lost heiress must commence. He had only heard from the housekeeper that night of Vivienne's flight from Renonçeux, and the Countess de Verdreuil's declaration that she had eloped. But Raoul treated this idea with scorn. That proud, pure-minded girl, in whose veins ran the blood of his race, would never have stooped to an action mean or dishonourable—of that he felt assured. He knew now why Blanche had hated and feared her.

These proofs were in her possession, and Raoul naturally supposed that the whole facts of Vivienne's birth had been known to her and concealed by her since she first took the girl under her protection. She had added but another to her long list of sins ; she had wronged—cruelly wronged—the orphan girl to whom she had promised protection, and sent her forth from the shelter of her roof to find friends or not as chance favoured her. Raoul's indignation knew no bounds when he thought of this, when he pictured the beautiful, friendless girl who was the heiress to this enormous wealth, thrown on the world to battle with its trials and temptations unaided and alone.

When he stood and looked his last—as he deemed—on the magnificence and beauty around him, he felt a torrent of passion and wrath surging in his veins at the thought of the ignominy and dishonour forced by this false, perjured woman who had borne his father's name, and reigned here as his father's wife, on the young orphan to whom those rights belonged.

Then he left the hall and went out into the night, his sad memories burdening him with the pain that never left him now—went out in his loneliness and grief to take farewell of all he had deemed his own from his childhood. All he had lost—first by a woman's treachery—then by a woman's birthright !

CHAPTER II.

THE MYSTERY DEEPENS.

“ To err is human,
To forgive divine ! ”—*Pope.*

WITH the earliest dawn of the following day Raoul de Verdreuil was speeding by express train to Paris. There was much to be done relative to the estates of Renonçeux—the proving of this newly-discovered will, and the tracing of the present whereabouts of the young heiress.

On his arrival in Paris, Raoul went immediately to his father's adviser and man of business, and laid before him the whole facts of this strange history, and the proofs which had lain so long concealed and unsuspected in the little worn, shabby-looking desk which Manon Beauvoir had placed in the keeping of Blanche. The lawyer did not seem in any way pleased at this unexpected discovery.

"In the first place," he said, "the exiled son had not dealt fairly by concealing his marriage from his family. In the next, although he had full power to will the estate in any way he pleased, he thought he should not have left it wholly and unreservedly to his daughter. There had been cases, of course, where female heirs had been appointed to the château and estates of Renonçeux, but these were very rare. As Count Maurice de Verdreuil knew his brother had a son," the *avocat* went on to say, "he should have merely portioned his daughter and let the estate go to his brother. The property in Paris alone amounted to a handsome fortune, and by this will everything went to the sole possession and control of a young girl, while the count himself had nothing but the title."

Here, however, Raoul interrupted his lamentations by telling him decidedly that they were not to the point. His uncle had chosen to leave everything to his daughter, with the sole condition that if, at his death, she was unmarried, she should live at Renonçeux with her uncle until she reached the age of twenty-one, when the whole property became her own. He wished, however, that his brother should live at the château, and have the guardianship of the young heiress until she married, when her husband was to assume the title and name of De Verdreuil. If she had no children, the property was to revert to the son of his brother, Raoul. If she had, then, in like manner, it was to descend to them.

These facts being plainly stated, and his father's death having, of course, done away with the question of guardianship, Vivienne became possessor of everything, subject to no control.

"Now," continued Raoul, "the strange part of the story is that my cousin should actually have been living with us so long, yet we were all in total ignorance of her relationship."

"But why did she run away?" questioned the lawyer, looking shrewdly at Raoul through his spectacles.

"That I cannot tell you," said the young man gravely. "I have reason to suspect that the late countess (how hard it was to give her that title!) did not treat her as kindly as she might have done. From what I can ascertain at the château, I find that a serious quarrel arose between them, and the young lady left Renonçeux secretly in consequence of this disagreement. What has become of her, and how or where she is living, is at present a complete mystery. It is for that I have come to bid you, without delay, do all in your power to find her—but *secretly*, of course—it will not do for the world to breathe any scandal concerning the young countess; and I wish all inquiries made as quietly and privately as possible."

"That, of course, shall be done," said the *avocat* gravely,

"although I think it will be rather difficult to trace the mysterious young lady. Have you a picture of her, or can you furnish me with a description?"

"I have no picture of her," said Raoul de Verdreuil; "of course I can give you a description, but I thought you had seen her at Renonçeux during my father's lifetime."

"No; I never had that pleasure. The will your father made was drawn up by a strange firm, the head of whom, as you doubtless remember, was a friend of the Countess de Verdreuil. You would not take my advice and contest that will, and I suppose now you will not listen to me if I tell you that *this* will does not legally prove the young lady, Mademoiselle St. Maurice, to be in truth the daughter of your uncle. How do you know the adopted child of Manon Beauvoir is in reality the child born at Bologna, and the certificate of whose birth is certainly not among these papers?"

"How averse legal minds are to take anything on faith!" said Raoul smiling. "Have I not told you that the letter which the Countess de Verdreuil wrote to me the night of her death contains the story of Manon Beauvoir's mistress—Vivienne's mother? Are not these old letters addressed to 'Madame St. Maurice' in my uncle's writing, and written by him to his wife, Vivienne? True, the countess says that the old nurse doubted the existence of a marriage, but this certificate proves it beyond dispute; then, too, he married under his own name, Maurice de Verdreuil, though he always called himself St. Maurice after he left France; therefore the marriage is legal on all points."

"Yes, yes, but why is there no certificate of the child's birth? How are we to prove that the daughter mentioned in his will is the young lady you suppose?—that is the question!" said the *avocat*.

"She was born at Bologna; my uncle, in writing to my father to meet him, dates that letter from Bologna. Manon Beauvoir states that her master left the child in her care, and from that time was never heard of again. She is ignorant that he was drowned accidentally ere *my* father arrived at Como. This ring is one with the seal and motto of our family, and was in the possession of Vivienne's mother; it must, therefore, have been given her by her husband. Surely this is enough to identify her with the child mentioned by my uncle."

The lawyer shook his head.

"Not enough if you choose to dispute it," he said. "Facts are stubborn things, and in law we deal with facts only; conjectures and suppositions go for nothing. However, it may be easier to prove the runaway ward of the late countess, the heiress of Renonçeux, since *you* have made up your mind she is so, than to prove she is *not*. Belief goes a long way. I suppose you wish

me to set inquiries afoot immediately. I shall work both sides of the question : first, what has become of the Mademoiselle St. Maurice who disappeared so suddenly from the château ; then whether this Mademoiselle St. Maurice is really the daughter of the Count Maurice de Verdreuil. We must send a confidential agent to Bologna immediately to begin with."

"Make all haste, at any rate," said Raoul eagerly. "I shall feel like an impostor till she is found, and all this sad injustice under which she has suffered so long is righted."

"People who have property have no business to contract secret marriages and adopt feigned names," said the old lawyer impetuously. "I really have very little sympathy with this young lady. Her father has not consulted her interest by weaving all these complications around the matter ; and it grieves me to think of this magnificent estate going to a female heir. I am very sorry it was not entailed ; you would have been safe enough then ; as it is——"

"As it is," interrupted Raoul, rising at last to put an end to the interview, "I have no right to it, and I am not going to pretend that I have. I leave these papers with you, and I only pray you do your best to settle these matters with as little delay as possible."

"*Merci !* monsieur. But it seems to me you are in as great a hurry to get rid of all this fine property of yours as most men would be to keep it," said the old lawyer, pushing back his spectacles and surveying the young count with mingled wrath and perplexity. "Of course I must do as you bid me, but I do it with little heart. I have always looked upon you as the heir to Renonçeux. And first I hear that your father makes everything over to his wife—it is well he did not ask me to draw up that will for him—then, when she dies, and I once more think you are to have your rights restored, you come to me with this extraordinary story of a secret marriage, and a will, and an heiress ! It is really trying, monsieur, I assure you."

"*Eh bien*, Monsieur Silvain," laughed Raoul, "it cannot be helped now. You must get over your disappointment as I do. Surely you would not counsel me to act in any other way, would you ?"

"I don't know ; I am not going to commit myself, monsieur ; but I see you are impatient to be off. Well *au revoir* for the present. Do you stay in Paris, or are you bound for the antipodes again immediately ?"

"I am only in Paris for two days," said Raoul. "If you need me, you know my address—Hôtel Meurice, as usual. Now I must leave you ; I have more business than enough to attend to in the next four-and-twenty hours."

"You will let me know where to communicate with you ?"

said Monsieur Silvain, as he bowed the young count out of his private room.

"Certainly," was the ready answer, "and once more let me impress upon you these two important facts—speed and secrecy."

"Depend upon me, monsieur," replied the *avocat* solemnly. Then the door closed, the interview was over, and Raoul de Verdreuil found himself once more in the gay and brilliant streets of Paris.

"If I had been an extravagant man," he mused, as he went slowly along, "this would mean simply ruin. How fortunate that I made up my mind, long ago, to have no waiting for dead men's shoes, oppressing my life with idleness and improvidence; now I can really afford to give up my expected fortune without much inconvenience. It is my home, my heritage for which I feel regret. How can I bear to look upon it again? How can I ever set foot in it, knowing *she* is the mistress of it all? loving her so madly as I do. Oh, child! child! if I could forget you! Have I lived all these years only to find out at last that the will of a man counts for nothing when once he has set his heart upon a woman's love? I—who thought myself so strong!"

Is it not always those who deem themselves most strong who prove the weakest in a conflict such as this—the conflict between the love that craves and the love that is denied. And Raoul knew well that, often as he had tried to deceive himself, often as he had proclaimed his love conquered, it was so far from being really forgotten that its memory never left him; it could torture, and pain, and deceive him still.

He called it folly, madness, but all the same he could neither forget nor banish it. He knew that his life could never bring him such joy again as this child, with her innocent face and dreaming eyes, and low, sweet melody of voice had brought him for that brief summertime of joy which had passed so soon, which had left him so desolate. To dwell upon her memory was at once sweetest joy and saddest pain; the more he thought of her, the more he marvelled whither she had fled.

Was it to Albert—her lover?

Nay, that was hardly possible. He would never have kept such a thing a secret from his friend, and yet to whom else would she be likely to go?

Perhaps in her proud independence she had determined to seek no aid, to tell no one of her flight. Perhaps Albert himself never guessed it. Then with this thought he shuddered afresh at the danger of such an unprotected life for one so young, so fair, so guileless. No, she could not have acted without some counsellor or adviser, and who would be so likely to supply that place as Albert—her earliest champion, her faithful friend, her

devoted lover. The only thing for which Raoul could not account was, why Albert had never mentioned her name in any of his letters. If Vivienne had fled to him in her trouble and distress, and he had married her, what was the reason of his keeping it a secret?

Indeed, the more Raoul thought of the whole matter, the more perplexed he grew. There was a mystery about it which only time and patience could unravel, and with a determination to do his utmost to discover it, he at last entered his hotel and sat down to consider the best plan for action.

That night Viotti was to arrive. These new complications Raoul had, of course, confided to him, and the quick perception and subtle instinct of the Italian gave him a deeper insight into the state of Raoul's feelings than he was aware of. Viotti saw that his benefactor loved this girl who, by a strange and untoward chain of circumstances, became now the mistress and owner of what he had deemed his own home. When Raoul had departed so hastily to Renonçeux, he left Viotti behind at Naples to wind up the few remaining affairs of Blanche de Verdreuil, and bade him join him in Paris as speedily as possible.

The Italian, on being left alone, immediately set himself to work to think out the matter for himself, and first of all he came to the conclusion that if Vivienne St. Maurice had fled from her guardian, as Blanche confessed she had done, in that letter, written to Raoul the night of her death, she had told no one, and confided to no one the secret of her flight, or her reasons for leaving the château. He had asked Raoul to give him that letter in which Blanche stated that "she had quarrelled with her ward; that after her departure she had discovered accidentally the papers in the secret drawer of her desk, and she left these to Raoul as a legacy, with the hope that he could make use of them." In another paper he would find Manon Beauvoir's story as she had related it on her death-bed to the Countess de Verdreuil. Now this letter gave Viotti much food for speculation, and from it he drew the following conclusions:—

First, Blanche hated this girl with such bitter hatred that she must have had some stronger cause for it than mere suspicion of her relationship to the De Verdreuil. As the discovery of her birth had only taken place *after* Vivienne's flight, she must have had some other reason for her dislike to the girl. Now what was that reason?

Viotti thought over this carefully. "Women never hate each other so much," he considered, "as from jealousy. Now was Blanche jealous of Vivienne's beauty, or had Vivienne robbed her of a conquest on which she had set her mind; one or other such reason must lie at the root of her jealousy—the question was which?" He pondered over this for some time; finally, he

concluded the young lady must have had some more serious reason than a mere disagreement, for running away from the only home she had in the world. As she *had* run away, however, the most important point was to discover where.

Letting the reasons alone for the moment, Viotti began to consider this question: Had she loved Raoul de Verdreuil's friend, the young musician? If so, and she had become his wife, Viotti began to think it very strange that no word of such a marriage had reached the young count. Again, if she had no lover, if she had fled for the sole reason of this disagreement between Blanche and herself, what was the most natural life for her to seek when she had only herself to depend on?

A new idea struck him as he debated this view of the subject. Her voice; that was a fortune in itself. Had not Raoul de Verdreuil spoken again and again of its marvellous beauty? Of course her voice would naturally be the only thing on which she could depend. Now he began to see his way more clearly. They must first find out whether any new singer of any fame had arisen within the last two years, and if so, who she was? The name, of course, would be no clue. Vivienne St. Maurice would be sure to adopt another name if she went on the stage. But patience and perseverance would clear up the difficulty at last. Of that Viotti felt assured, and he resolved to tell Raoul de Verdreuil, when he met him in Paris, of his conjectures respecting Vivienne's present life, and see whether he coincided with his views on the matter.

"One of two things it must be," said the Italian to himself, at the end of a long and serious consideration of all the events he had heard of, "the girl has fled to the protection of a lover, or else she has resolved to make her own way in the world, and for that reason would naturally utilize the great gift she possesses. Will it be very difficult to trace her, I wonder?"

So his thoughts ran on during the intervening space of time between Raoul's departure for Renonçeux and the day when he was to meet him in Paris; and by the time he left Naples Carlo Viotti had become convinced that he was right in supposing Vivienne St. Maurice to have resolved upon a life of independence for herself.

Blanche had treated the girl cruelly, of that he had no doubt; and since he had discovered that Raoul loved her, a new light entirely was thrown upon the subject. Blanche had not rested content with the wrong she had done to Raoul; she had also visited upon the young, friendless girl he loved, her cruel and malicious spite. The more Viotti thought of it the more convinced he became that jealousy was at the bottom of all this mystery connected with the lost heiress.

Whether she loved Raoul or not, it was impossible to say yet;

but the Italian shrewdly suspected she was not indifferent to the young count. This supposition furnished him with a substantial reason for her conduct. If Blanche had sown dissension and coldness between them, the girl was more likely to flee from Renonçeux and hide herself and her sorrows under a new life and an assumed name. Some serious cause for this flight and sudden disappearance there must be, and what more probable cause than that? None.

Viotti argued this out, and then feeling assured he was not far from the truth, he set out on his journey to France with a lighter heart than he had carried for a long time. The agony and vengeance of his soul had been laid down for ever by the grave of the woman who had betrayed him. True, he had hated her with a fierce, unsparing hatred; he had resolved to give her to shame and reproach and the just punishment of her life-long guilt; but when he had sought her presence, armed with that resolve, actuated by those fierce passions, he had found that she would receive her punishment from a mightier judge: and his anger died out for ever.

The hour that had brought him this knowledge brought him the teaching of a power that he had never yet acknowledged. He had armed himself to crush and destroy her; he had longed to avenge his own wrongs upon her—to tear away the veil from her secret sins, and reward her evil for evil, with the sternness of the Mosaic law itself; and he found that his own will was nothing, that a man's purpose set against God's power is a thing as fragile as a child's soap-bubble, which the first faint breeze of the outer air can destroy.

And when he looked his last on the fair spot which contained all that remained of the once beautiful and victorious Countess of Renonçeux, when he stood by her grave in the red glow of the sunset the evening before he left Naples, he bent his head reverently there, and something like a prayer escaped his lips as he murmured sadly, "I forgive—at last."

But the forgiveness could not reach her now, and the prayer could not alter the sentence passed upon her, and all his pity was powerless to bridge the gulf which separates the living from the dead; for alas! like most acts of human remorse—like most atonements in human lives, they only came—too late!

CHAPTER III.

DEPTHS OF PAIN.

“The labour we delight in physics pain.”

Shakspeare.

OUT of the depths of calamity men gather the heroism of their future. Great powers often lie dormant in a human soul, until the bracing air of adversity sweeps suddenly over it; then it awakes from its lethargy. The innate strength so long untried, the powers of mind and brain, so long lulled to indolence and rest, arise from their slumbers, and the man who in prosperity might have wasted his life as an idle dreamer, becomes, by force of calamity and hardship, great with the truest, noblest greatness that the world immortalizes, or fame rewards.

Yet—if we only knew it—there is more true courage needed to accept existence, when the cruel teachings of necessity have robbed it of all charm, than is ever required to bow down to the touch of death and resign life, because all that makes life worth living has fled from us.

So Albert Hoffmann often thought as he battled resolutely on with the hardships which, though they only purified and ennobled his soul, yet gave the languor of physical weakness, the weariness of bodily fatigue, the wasting of strength, the exhaustion of suffering to his body.

He had taken up his abode in Florence by Vivienne's wish, and she it was who cheered and encouraged him to hope for the success that seemed ever so distant and so hopeless. For though the young singer had great influence, managers are not always inclined to bring out a new opera by an unknown composer, at their own personal risk, merely to please their favourite prima donna, and Vivienne was put off with promises and pretty speeches from time to time, until she plainly saw that there was no chance of Albert's opera being brought out till the spring following. She had not meant to stay in Florence so long, but for Albert's sake she resolved to make the sacrifice. He never knew that she had agreed with the director of the opera-house to forfeit half her salary for the expenses of the undertaking, and never guessed the strenuous and unflinching exertions she had made solely in his behalf ere she succeeded in wringing a promise from this same individual that the opera should be produced without fail, if she would consent to bind herself down to a fresh agreement with him for the next season.

With this hope and this end in view Albert struggled on. Poverty was nearer him now than ever it had been before, but poverty in Italy has a grace and a poetry of its own. One needs so little there, and even that little has a picturesque charm around it.

He breathed no word to Vivienne of his difficulties, and she never suspected them. He lived in one solitary room, in a remote part of the city, and when he came to see her he never alluded, in any way, to the daily increasing privations of his life. But they told visibly on his health, on the delicate, weakly frame, so long accustomed to every care and luxury wealth could give, and his strength grew less and less, while still he worked harder and harder to still the passionate pain of his heart, and the trials of his poverty-stricken life.

Vivienne saw that physical suffering was often his; that physical weakness oppressed him with a strange languor altogether new to him, and she gently chided him for working so hard, and tried to persuade him to lay aside his compositions, and give himself some rest, but he only smiled at her anxieties, and declared that life was all too short for art, and he could not afford an idle hour now.

So while the months drifted by, these two remained in Florence, all unconscious of the search that was being made for them, and the great discoveries and changes at Renonçieux—ignorant even that Blanche de Verdreuil was dead, or that Raoul was speeding from place to place, and advertising in foreign papers and employing all sorts of agents to trace Vivienne.

One evening Albert came to her, as he often did, for a little rest from his labours, a little change to the colourless monotony of his life. He came restless with the fever and the pain of his unsatisfied longings, but he knew that the sound of her voice and the sight of her fair, calm face, would be to him as the soothing touch of a cool hand to a fever-stricken man.

She was alone when he entered, seated before her window and gazing out at the clear, cold starlit night, with a book lying idly in her lap. Something in the negligence and dejection of her attitude struck Albert as unusual, and when she turned her head to welcome him he saw the soft eyes were dimmed by a mist of tears.

"Ah! it is you," she said, rising as he advanced to greet her. "Why have you deserted me so long? I thought you were never coming again, Albert!"

A warm flush rose to the brow of the young artist.

"Have you missed me?" he said eagerly. "Oh, Vivienne, if I thought you cared to see me half as much as I care to come, you would not say I was often absent!"

"Of course I have missed you," she answered, speaking lightly

to cover the embarrassment his words occasioned. "You have not been here for a week at least! what have you done with yourself all the time?"

"I have not been well," he said gently; "I suppose, as you say, Vivienne, work tells upon us in the long-run; I have been obliged to lay up for a little, and rest myself at last."

"Oh, Albert, and you never told me," said the girl reproachfully. "How unkind!"

"Was it?" he said, seating himself wearily by the fire. "Ah, well, I am all right again now, Vivienne, and I have brought over this mass. I want you to tell me what you think of it."

"More compositions! Oh, Albert, you will really make yourself ill if you work so hard," she answered, as she took the score from his hand and glanced over it. "Well, you must first have some refreshment after your long walk, and then I will listen, and sing it too, if you wish."

With these words she rang the bell, and gave orders for wine and fruit to be brought. Then she seated herself opposite Albert, and said laughingly, "I must receive you *sans cérémonie* to-night. Madame Pitteri is not well, and has retired for the night, I believe."

"It is like old times," said Albert, looking at the girl's beautiful face with the rapt, passionate adoration of his heart shining in his eyes. "Ah, Vivienne, how happy I was *then*!"

"Because life was rosy?" she asked smiling. "You were a very useless dreamer in those days, Albert, if I remember right; you lived as completely out of the world as though you were in a monastery. You were a visionary, a poet, shunning all the actual realities of life, and living in a world where the very thought of pain or suffering was excluded. Now that you have awakened to its responsibilities, you feel it doubly hard to battle with them!"

He sighed deeply at her words.

"I suppose I am very useless," he answered. "But oh, Vivienne, what am I to do? I try my best; I work with all my heart, with all my energy, and yet you deem me a dreamer and an idler."

"Ah, no, Albert," said Vivienne hastily, "I never meant that for a moment. No one could do more than you do now. It is hard, I know, to struggle on against adverse circumstances so long; it seems to me sometimes that life is nothing after all but one long struggle, that we must all toil and work and strive, and consume our lives in grinding, ceaseless labour if we wish to do anything for the world at all—the world that is so thankless, even for our best gifts!"

"What were you thinking of," he asked her softly, "when I came here to-night?"

She coloured, and her eyes drooped for a moment ; then she answered gravely,—

“I was thinking how sad it is to be always alone ; I have no mother to love or comfort me. A friendless woman against a friendless world ! Is it not enough to make me sad when I think of it ?”

The words had an intense and touching pathos that went to her listener's heart ; Vivienne was usually so brave and hopeful, she never betrayed by any word that her life was not a life she cared to live, and now those words revealed to him a deeper loneliness even than his own. For was she not a woman ? and do not women's hearts and women's natures crave for love as flowers crave for sunshine, as prisoned birds for the free, sweet summer air ? This friendless, beautiful girl, with her gifts and her grace, and her proud instincts, was yet as desolate now as any lost, stray fawn that has wandered from its herd, and become an alien in the sight of all others.

“You feel that *now*,” he said, leaning towards her and speaking eagerly, though his voice was very low and very earnest. “Ah, Vivienne, your life need not be a lonely one unless you wish ; the world would give you love and homage enough if you will it.”

“You would not counsel me to seek such love as *that* ?” she asked, raising her head with quiet scorn. “The world and I will have nothing more to do with each other than we have at present, Albert. Do you think I do not know what it would say of me if I gave it but the slightest chance ? Where is the worth of any love I might win there, when with it would come scorn and shame ? I have not even such protection as lies in a stainless name or blameless birthright.”

“*That* you cannot tell,” he said gravely ; “I do not believe the Countess de Verdreuil's story, Vivienne. You have nothing but her own assertion to go upon.”

“True, but gran'mère always bid me not count too surely upon my name being really mine, or my birth being free from some dim wrong, some vague, mysterious error which lay upon my childhood like a shadow. Why did my father disappear so strangely ? why did he never seek me again ? it would have been a greater kindness had he slain me, ere he left me such a heritage as shame !”

She spoke passionately, indignantly ; all her woman's soul fired and tortured by the memory of unmerited wrong. Her own guiltless life could never be free from blame now, it seemed to her ; sinless and stainless as it was, no honourable love would ever be given to her while the ban of dishonour rested on that life, and covered it with shame—not her own, but still which she must bear till death.

“Do you feel it so much, dear ?” the young artist asked, as he

left his seat and went and knelt beside her in the warm glow of the firelight. "Oh, Vivienne, if only you could have *loved me!* if only you could love me now!"

The words broke from him despite himself, despite all self-control; despite even the knowledge of his own poverty and weakness, and the little he had to offer her. He only remembered that she was friendless, nameless, unprotected, and he loved her.

A sudden rush of tears came to her eyes, and the colour burned hotly in her face. She bent her head, that graceful, haughty head, with its diadem of sunny hair, and a slight shiver shook her, as if with the chill of some memory whose pain was forgotten still.

"Oh, hush," she said entreatingly. "Do not force me to add to the pain of your own life now; I thought that old story was a thing so utterly of the past, I never dreamt you would recur to it again."

"Is it an old story to you?" he asked sadly. "Oh, Vivienne, to me it is still a thing of yesterday. It can never be *past*, for it rises afresh with every sight of your face; it seems a time has never been, or a time can never be, when I shall cease to forget I love you!"

He spoke so wearily, so hopelessly, that the girl's heart ached for him. If only she could comfort him—love him she could not, with the love he gave her, "the love of man and woman when they love their best."

"We are both alone," he went on earnestly; "the world is against me, I know, and I have little enough to offer you but a heart that has known no other love save love of you, Vivienne. Oh, my darling! if only that love could content you, I would ask no other thing of life save to try and make you happy; at least, no tongue could speak against you, no breath of scorn approach you then."

"And you would give all and ask nothing, Albert," she said wearily. "You would waste all this wealth of love on an empty, thankless heart. Nay, that bargain would be very unfair, it could not content *you*, it would never satisfy me; I look upon you as a brother still, dear Albert: dearer than that you could not be; *nearer* than that you cannot."

He rose and stood before her, pale, hopeless, saddened.

"Be honest with me at least, Vivienne," he implored. "If you can never love me as I wish, is it because you care for some one else? I will never trouble you again then."

The crimson colour flushed all her face with rosy warmth, then faded swiftly away, and left it paler than his own.

"You have no right to ask," she said passionately, in the pain and agony of her wounded pride, "I shall never marry

any one although I do not marry *you* : let that content you now."

"Forgive me, he said gently, reading in those passionate, impulsive words the death-knell of all his hopes, knowing that her heart too bore the pain that throbbed and burned within his own. "I will never ask you again, Vivienne. I will try and remember love is not for me while I live in this world of sorrow and regret."

"Oh, Albert," cried the girl remorsefully, as she heard in the bitterness of those words some of the agony her own heart had learnt to bear, "I am so sorry to pain you, but what can I do? You are my one friend now, do not let us recur to this again: try and conquer it as a man can conquer when he strives his best."

"Do you think I have not tried?" he asked, with a smile so sad that the tears rushed to her eyes in sudden sympathy. "Do you think I have not prayed and sought for forgetfulness with every power of my heart. And then your face crossed me again, your eyes looked up to mine once more, and the years of absence were as though they had never been, and—I have my task to learn again, Vivienne."

She was silent.

What could she say to calm that pain she herself had given; to chase from his heart the agony of its own passionate unrest. "It seems cruel to give you the same answer again," she said at last; "but I have no other. My life has its own burdens—my heart its own bitterness: only I would have done anything to save *you* more pain than you bear already."

His face paled, his very lips were white with emotion.

"It may not be for very long," he said, in a voice low and sad, yet infinitely gentle. "I have thought so of late, often and often. I could almost pray to end my life soon, I am so weary—you cannot guess how weary—of the endless struggle it has been of late."

She looked up at him; her eyes full of pity, her face soft, and shadowed by regret. It seems so hard to suffer when youth is yet fresh, and life just opening; when the future should be painted in the fair, glad colours of hope, and instead there looms the shadow of despair over all the outstretched canvas.

"Forgive me that I seem ungrateful," she said softly; "and Albert, do not speak so despairingly of life. God did not give you genius for you to make light of it because the shadows of trouble cross your path, and the touch of grief lies heavy on your heart. A time will come when, looking back on all that seems so hard to bear now, you will see it was ordered for a wise purpose—a noble end."

He did not answer her; he stood silently beside her there, in the dusky room, battling with the fierce pain of his heart; striving to believe how hopeless and how vain a thing was this

love, which seemed now a part of his being, so deep-rooted and so fervent was its strength.

Then she broke the silence, and her voice recalled him to himself again. "Will you not try the organ? it is completed now. Of course, it is very small, but it answers all my purposes."

"Certainly," he answered. "I had forgotten all about my mass; it is in the other room, is it not?"

"Yes," she said, rising and leading the way. "Do you not think I have made my home very comfortable, as well as picturesque, Albert?"

"You have indeed; I should scarcely know it again. I suppose you will stay here all the winter now?"

"Oh, yes; I am very well content with it, and it is too remote from the city to be robbed of its charm of seclusion. While I remain in Florence—which will be until '*Kunigunde*' appears—I shall not change my residence."

They had reached what Vivienne called her "music-room" by this time, and Albert went up to the small organ, just placed there, and sat down to try it. The instrument was an insignificant one after the magnificent organ at Renonçieux, but it answered ordinary purposes well enough, and Vivienne had brought him thither as a distraction to the gloom and sadness of his thoughts. She guessed rightly that music would soothe him better than anything else, and she placed his mass on the desk before him, and stood by to listen to it with an attention and interest too genuine not to please the composer.

Whatever Albert might seem to lack in point of strength and firmness, and manly fortitude, in his art he was a master and a king, by the grandeur and force of an inspiration born of the purest, loftiest genius that ever filled a human soul. She knew it, and as she listened to him, and the grand, rich harmonies of the cathedral hymn he played rose and fell in sonorous, rhythmical measure on her ear, she wondered how a power so great, and a mind so noble, could yet not force the world to listen and believe in it.

"It is indeed beautiful," she said, with a deep-drawn sigh, as the music ceased at last. "Oh, Albert, how can you write such music and yet despair of fame?"

"That is what Bertha used to say," he answered, with a faint smile: "poor little thing; her prophecies have not come true yet."

"But they will," said Vivienne eagerly; "I feel sure of it. You know, Albert, it is only to obtain the first hearing that is so difficult; once that is done you will have little to fear. When your opera is performed in the spring you will have no lack of success and encouragement, I know. Are you going?" she added, as he left the organ and gathered up his MSS., preparatory to bidding her farewell.

"Yes, it is late, and I must not take too much advantage of madame's indisposition," he said, with a faint smile. "I will come up again soon, and hope to hear you sing my 'Agnus Dei' for me. It will just suit your voice, I think."

She did not answer, but led the way back to the other room, and stood silently beside him in the firelight, as he put on his overcoat, his only protection against the chill air of the winter night.

Then he took her hands in his own, and looked sadly down at the sweet face, which looked strangely pale and weary now.

"Farewell," he said softly; "I will not vex you again with my foolish hopes. I will try and believe that disappointments are best for me, hard as they are to bear."

Then he left her, and she stood for long after he had gone, with her face bent on her hands, and her heart filled with bitter and regretful memories.

"Two lives shadowed by the same pain!" she murmured to herself. "O God, why is the world so full of sorrow? Why is love so vainly given, so ill bestowed?"

Others—as young, as fair, as perplexed as the beautiful, lonely girl who had accepted the desolation of her life for the sake of the higher gifts within it—have asked this question with the same wonder, the same despair.

Others—like her—have had to wait and to wonder through long years of bitterness and pain, for an answer still untold.

CHAPTER IV.

KING OF HIMSELF.

"When I arose and saw the dawn,
I sigh'd for thee;
When light rode high and the dew was gone,
I sigh'd for thee;
When noon lay heavy on flower and tree,
And the weary day turn'd to his rest,
Lingering like an unloved guest,
I sigh'd for thee!"

ALBERT left the lonely villa on the Florentine hills with a heavy heart that night. He had not meant to betray his secret—to tell Vivienne of the long unconquered love, which had again sprung up to warm, vivid, passionate life at her presence, and he had betrayed it by that sudden impulse to comfort her in her loneliness which had arisen with her words.

"What a wasted life mine is!" he thought, as he went on

through the lighted streets. "I have no love, no fame, nothing to cheer me in my solitude, or inspire me with hope for the future. All those lofty, impossible dreams which filled my boyhood, are slowly vanishing before the realities of life as it is now. I begin to think, with Jean Paul, that music is the saddest of all sad things, 'because it speaks to us of that which in all our life we find not, and never shall find.' Yes! even my art is pain to me now. All I achieve is so far below what I wish to achieve—a 'striving towards the light,' which only seems to recede farther from me with every effort I make."

His head was bent in thought, and his eyes rested on the pavement at his feet. In his abstraction he suddenly came in contact with a stranger advancing from the opposite end of the street, and ere he was aware of it knocked somewhat rudely against him.

Recovering from the shock, he began a hasty apology for his negligence, but his words were cut short by an exclamation of amazement and incredulity, and looking up he saw the tall, powerful figure, and the dark, familiar face of Raoul de Verdreuil.

"Albert—by all that's wonderful!"

"Raoul! is it really you?"

Then they stood with clasped hands and eager eyes, and all the glad, unspoken welcome of their hearts shining out in each face, despite the astonishment of their sudden and unexpected meeting.

"Why, Albert, whatever are you doing in Florence?" exclaimed Raoul de Verdreuil, as soon as he could find words to greet his friend. "Here have I been hunting for you far and wide, and at last stumble upon you in this prosaic manner. Where on earth have you been hiding yourself all this time?"

"Have you not had my letters?" asked his friend. "I wrote to you when I left Germany, and again from Milan; then from Florence, where I have been for the last six months. I have been puzzling myself to account for your long silence. I could not understand it; and now, what wind of chance has blown you here, Raoul?"

"It would take the whole night to tell you," said Raoul de Verdreuil; "so many things have happened since we last met. Come to my hotel. I only arrived an hour ago, and was strolling through the streets to pass the time away more than anything else. And then, to think of meeting you like this! What extraordinary things do happen in this world sometimes! But here, I am keeping you standing in the cold; how thoughtless of me!"

He turned as he spoke and drew Albert's arm within his own, just with the old, familiar ease of their boyish days; and it seemed to Albert as if the intervening time had been but a dream,

and once more he was awaking to find himself by Raoul's side in the old, remembered woods of Renonçieux.

"And now, *mon cher*," said his friend eagerly, as they walked on together in the direction of his hotel, "tell me how has the world been using you? What made you leave Germany? I thought that was the land *par excellence* for your art to shine in all its glory. And now, when I begin to look at you, I see you are sadly changed. How thin and worn you look, dear friend! Have you been ill?"

"Yes; but nothing to speak of. I knocked myself up with too much work, and for the last month have been on the sick list; but I feel quite strong again now, Raoul."

"You look it, I must say," said his friend drily. "A breath of wind would blow you away, I should fancy. So much for having no one to look after you, Albert. I see I shall have to constitute myself your guardian once more."

Albert smiled. It was pleasant to see the kind, familiar face of his early friend again—pleasant to feel the strong, protecting influence of his presence, and hear the kindly tones of his voice—so pleasant that he wondered he had not missed him more during these long, dreary months of absence.

"I have been fighting the battle of life single-handed," he said lightly, "and somehow or other, Raoul, it has dawned upon me that I am rather worsted in the fray. I never was good for very much, you know, and Fame has been playing a Will-o'-the-wisp game with me that has rather tired my patience and my strength."

"I wish I had known it. How selfish you must have thought me all this time, Albert!" said Raoul, with such keen self-reproach in his heart as had never smitten it during the years of his exile.

"Not at all," answered Albert hastily. "I know how much trouble has fallen upon your own life, Raoul; my affairs are trifling and insignificant in comparison."

"Here is the hotel at last," said Raoul de Verdreuil. "Now come in at once. I have enough to tell you to make the night scarce long enough to hold it!"

He waited for no answer, but led the way to his own rooms, and then, bidding his friend be seated, he ordered supper to be served for them immediately. He then closed the door, and came over to where Albert was sitting.

"Now let me look at you!" he said, placing his hands on his shoulders, and gazing down at the fair, delicate face, where the colour wavered and paled before his eager scrutiny.

"Oh, *mon ami*!" he said, and his hands fell from the young man's shrinking form as he spoke, "what have you been doing to yourself to cause such a change? Why, you are a mere shadow, a ghost of what I left behind me."

"Am I?" said Albert, flushing like a girl before those searching

eyes—that pained and sorrowful look. “Nonsense, Raoul, I am only a little fagged and worn with work and late hours ; I shall be all right when I get some rest again.”

But Raoul shook his head and answered nothing. His heart ached to see the altered face of the young artist. He was changed, so utterly changed ! The beautiful, spiritual expression, the rapt, fervent light, which had given his face the beauty of a sun-god, the cloudless brilliance of a shadowless peace, were all gone now. Instead of them Raoul saw the grave, serene melancholy—the deep and weary pain of a heart no longer at rest—of a life troubled and disquieted. The beauty with which nature had endowed him was still there, but it was a beauty now shadowed, and worn, and faded with the combat and the weariness of life. The struggle had been too hard for a nature so thoroughly unfitted for the rough usage and rude, harsh ways of the world around, and in the struggle existence had been robbed of its purest, loftiest charms, and become cheerless, barren, and utterly distasteful.

“Do not trouble about me, Raoul,” continued Albert at length, breaking the long, troubled silence which had fallen upon them both ; “I am impatient to hear why you are in Florence. What has happened since we parted ? I am in total ignorance of everything.”

“You know that Blanche is dead, I suppose ?” said Raoul.

“Dead ! good heavens, no ! Where ? how ? Why, Raoul, you have regained your rights ! Renonçeux is yours again ! Why did you not tell me sooner ?”

“Hush ! don’t begin to congratulate me till you hear all,” said Raoul, interrupting him. “I wrote you a full account of all that had happened, but I suppose the letter is still at Leipzig, waiting to be claimed. Yes, Blanche is dead, and yet Renonçeux is not mine—will never be mine again, as long as I live. Now, don’t interrupt me, and I will tell you all about it. It is the strangest story I have ever heard of ; in a book it would be wonderful and improbable, but yet it is *all true*.”

Then he slowly and carefully unwound the threads of that mysterious tale of wrong and shame, of vengeance and of passion, of pride and cruelty, which had worked such evil on the lives of those connected with it. He told him of his uncle’s will, of Blanche de Verdreuil’s crimes, of his strange meeting with Carlo Viotti, of the chain of events by which he had traced out the former life and long-concealed secret of the woman who had passed as his father’s wife, and finally of the lost heiress, who was no other than Vivienne St. Maurice.

At this juncture Albert could keep silence no longer.

“Vivienne !” he exclaimed, springing from his seat, and facing Raoul with astonishment, delight, and incredulity, all struggling for expression at one and the same moment. “Is

that why you came to Florence? Did you know she was here?"

"No!" exclaimed Raoul, amazed and incredulous now in his turn. "Vivienne *here*! Where? Is it true, then, that you are married?"

"Married!" ejaculated the young artist bitterly. "Good heavens! no! What made you think of such a thing, Raoul? I married to the heiress of Renonçeux! How glad she will be of her escape, and what a mad fool I have been even to think of her!"

"She is here, and you are here, and yet you are not—married?" said Raoul wonderingly. "How comes it, Albert?"

"Simply enough. I came to Florence to try my luck. I was given a letter of introduction to a great singer, Irene Véronique. I called upon her and found Vivienne. She fled from Renonçeux and went upon the stage; she adopted a new name, and has been living in Italy for the last two years. That is all the mystery, Raoul."

"And I have been searching for her so long," said Raoul, still in the same bewildered voice, "searching town after town, city after city, and find her *here*!"

"I was thunderstruck when I discovered her," said Albert Hoffmann. "I could not believe my eyes. I imagined she was still living with the countess. What unheard-of complications are arising out of all this! a countess who is no countess, an heir who is no heir, a singer who is the rightful owner of all the wealth and titles of Renonçeux! Raoul, it is a sort of fairy-tale, ending up with a newly-discovered princess; it only needs the prince to make it complete."

"And he ought to be yourself," said Raoul, trying to veil the pain of his heart by speaking jestingly. "You who were her first champion, her most devoted adherent. You love her still, Albert, do you not?"

"Love her," said the young man despairingly, "I shall love her till I die, Raoul. But it is all in vain—all in vain."

"What!" said Raoul breathlessly, as he gazed in incredulous amazement at the face of his friend. "Do you mean to say she does not care for you? Blanche told me long ago that she loved you, that she had confessed it to her."

"Then Blanche told you a fearful falsehood," said the young artist indignantly. "I told Vivienne of my love before I left Renonçeux, before your father died, Raoul, and she refused me then. I left the château, resolved to work and forget my pain by dint of ceaseless, unending labour. I could not. I met Vivienne here by some strange freak of chance—met her lonely, friendless—a woman with a woman's best gifts, undergoing a woman's worst trial, the trial of a public career, such as hers is

now. And yet she is pure, lofty, stainless, unblamable in spite of all; and her life is one that the world can never taint with the breath of scorn, or pollute by the faintest scandal."

"I can well believe it," said Raoul proudly. "She comes of a noble race. She is not likely to forget the grand old maxim, *Noblesse oblige*. But yet it seems so strange to think of her leading such a life. Did she ever tell you why she left *Renonçeux*?"

"Not the particulars—only that Blanche insulted her most cruelly—that she declared her to be a child of shame, and that unless she agreed to certain conditions which Blanche named, and Vivienne indignantly refused, she would not allow her to live at the château any longer."

Raoul's face grew dark with suppressed passion as he heard these words.

"That woman was infamous—bad to the core!" he said bitterly, as he rose to his feet, and began to pace restlessly up and down the room. "It is my belief she knew Vivienne's parentage—Vivienne's history—from the moment of her adopting the girl after Manon Beauvoir's death. And yet she concealed it from every one, and told the child that shameful lie, and drove her forth to live or die, or perish by worse than death, with the stigma of dishonour added to her friendlessness and beauty. Great heaven! of what are women made, that they can drive the young and innocent of their own sex to a fate the worst man would shrink from giving them?"

Albert's face grew paler than before. Some sense of the unnatural horror of that dead woman's act came over him for the first time. He saw the perils which Vivienne had escaped, and the danger through which she had passed. He knew now the sufferings she must have borne, the agony which that pure, proud heart had known, and he ceased to wonder that she deemed no solitude too deep, no loneliness too great, for her life now.

Presently Raoul stopped in his walk, and came and stood before him. A great pity, an infinite tenderness, shone in his eyes, as they rested on the white, weary face of the young artist.

"Albert," he said, "I am sorry for you. All these years, I thought you were so sure to win her love; I never dreamt of the possibility of failure for a moment. And is this why you are so changed?"

"Am I so changed, really?" he asked, looking sadly up at the earnest, loving face of his one friend. "I do not know it myself, but I suppose such things do alter one in time. I have loved her so long, so dearly; it is hard to think I am nothing to her, while she is everything in the world to me."

A terrible yearning shook his voice, and Raoul turned silently away. It was so hard to see him suffer, and yet know he had neither hope nor consolation to offer.

"I wonder why she does not care for you," he said, feeling that the glad throb of his own heart at the mention of Vivienne being still free was a bitter disloyalty to his friend. "Do you think she cares for any one else, Albert?"

"I never thought so till to-night," he said, with a pathos of weariness in his voice more touching than any complaint: "for to-night her heart seemed troubled by a grief as deep as my own, and from to-night I know her love is for ever dead to me!"

Had he looked at Raoul's face as he said those words, he would have seen the old grave shadow of disquietude steal over it once more. But his own anguish, fresh-brought by the memory of his hopeless passion, blinded him to all else, and he never raised his eyes or altered his dejected attitude until the warm pressure of Raoul's hand on his bowed shoulders forced him to look up.

"Come, Albert, be brave!" he said cheerily. "We have all our burdens to bear, our griefs to carry, and our work to do in spite of them. I wish with all my heart I could comfort you; but your best remedy is time, and your only consolation *work*. The one will slowly deaden the first sharpness of pain, the other will distract your thoughts from dwelling on it."

Albert raised his eyes with such a dumb, wistful agony in them that Raoul's heart ached for his suffering; *he* knew so well what love in vain was.

"I will try," he said simply. "But all the life and joy of my heart seems buried in the grave of this one hopeless love. The best I can do for art is weak and unprofitable now—the breath of the wind, which men feel, and then forget! If even I thought my works might live, it would be some consolation; but that is denied me too."

"Dear Albert," said Raoul, with all a woman's gentleness and pity in his voice, "there comes a time in most men's lives when they feel existence is a burden too heavy to bear, when 'to curse God and die' is a temptation whispered by the same voice that whispered it to the patriarch of old, and a temptation which needs as much moral courage to resist as he displayed. I have known its fierceness and battled with its pain, and even you, innocent dreamer as you are, have not escaped it. If telling you of my sufferings will in any way lighten your own, I will let you hear at last the story of the past dark years, and how I learnt the greatest wisdom a human heart can learn—to suffer and endure."

Then, while the slow dark hours of the night passed on to join the dawn of a new day, Raoul de Verdreuil told out to the

friend he loved so well, the story of his pride, his madness, and despair—how, in the far-off days of his youth, he had met the woman who had wronged him in his manhood, and the love he had scorned and rejected then became the weapon of her vengeance in after-years. He spoke of his father's infatuation, and the base use that had been made of it. He touched lightly on that terrible quarrel between them when their parting had been for ever—though neither guessed it at the time—and he dwelt sadly on the gradual estrangement, the slow but sure distrust which had crept between their hearts, and taken the place of the old familiar love and confidence.

Then came the account of the crowning misery which had fallen upon him when he first learnt the bitterness of his father's wrath and jealousy, and knew he had lost all the possessions he had looked upon as his own from childhood. He told of the width and depth of the desolation to which he had fled when he left the heritage of his fathers, and knew that the brand of dishonour rested upon his life—of misery, privation, solitude, when his heart had been filled with raging passions, and the one thought ever present had been revenge. But the darkness had passed—the power of that God-bestowed gift of intellect within, had forced him to exertion once again, and with labour came relief, and with relief salvation. He had life and strength and genius, and they saved him from despair; and when at last the power for his long-sought vengeance was bestowed on him, he had learnt there is greater punishment for guilt than the hand of man can deal—there is greater peace in mercy than the satiety of revenge can ever know; and though the pride and self-sufficiency of his life had been crushed and weakened in the struggle, he had come out in the end a conqueror.

"Be true to your genius, Albert," he said, as his tale drew to an end at last. "Be true to *yourself*, and you have a greater gift in store for you than you deem possible. In suffering, men have taught their noblest lessons—have learnt their greatest powers, and it is by suffering only that we learn there is no victory so great as the victory we gain over our own hearts, and the evil temptings of our lower nature."

"There is one thing you have omitted in your story, Raoul," said Albert at last, after a long, unbroken silence, "and that is the secret of the love I once suspected—the love whose every thought and hope you strove so hard to stifle, because you deemed it disloyalty to me. Dear Raoul, can you think I have known you so long, and could not read your secret—strive as you will to hide it? I feared it long ago, though my fears were banished by Vivienne herself—but *now*—now, Raoul, I know our sorrow has its root in the same pain—the doubts and fears of unrequited love."

Over Raoul de Verdreuil's dark and haughty face a flush of pride and anger swept at these words.

"Do not speak of it now," he said, with unwonted sternness in his voice. "Let us forget that for once our friendship wavered—for once my heart harboured a feeling of envy for you."

"I will forget it," cried Albert eagerly and impulsively. "I will forget it for ever, Raoul, but only because I see my own folly too clearly ever to fall into the same error again—only because I know so well that your love is Vivienne's, and hers is free for you to win still."

For some moments neither spoke; their hearts were too full for words; and when Raoul's voice broke the silence that had fallen on both, it had a richer cadence of love thrilling in its tones than Albert Hoffmann had ever heard before.

"Whatever the future holds for me, of good or evil," he said at last, "it can never hold anything more true and faithful than your love, Albert; it can never teach me greater lessons than those I have learnt at the sacrifice of all my pride and self-will—by God's help alone!"

And Raoul spoke truly.

Once he would have compassed heaven and earth for vengeance: now he knew that sweeter a thousand times than any retribution of man is the peace that comes with forgiveness.

The man who is master over his own passions is a king indeed, worthy of all sovereignty—is ruler of an empire greater than any the world holds; and such a kingdom had Raoul de Verdreuil won for himself when he learnt that mercy exceeds vengeance, even as heaven exceeds earth—that pardon for wrong done is the noblest creed a human heart can learn, and the grandest doctrine Christianity can teach!

CHAPTER V.

CROSS PURPOSES.

"All thoughts, all passions, all delights,
 Whatever stirs this mortal frame,
 Are but the ministers of Love,
 And feed his sacred flame."

"Is the Signora Véronique at home?"

"Yes, signor, but she cannot be seen. She gave me orders to admit none to her presence to-day."

"I must see her," was the calm reply of the stranger who was standing at the entrance of the Villa Constanza. "My business is of the utmost importance. I have travelled from France on purpose to communicate it, and I cannot leave until I have done so. See here!" he added, forcing a handful of silver coins on the woman, who still hesitated about admitting him. "Take these and bring me to your mistress; she will not blame you, I promise."

Maruccio's scruples vanished before the sight of the silver, and she led the importunate stranger into the hall, and left him before the closed door of one of the rooms, where she said her mistress was. Then she disappeared, and Raoul de Verdreuil, after an instant's hesitation, knocked at the door and received permission to enter. He knew the voice so well—the sweet, low voice whose music had been so long lost to him.

A moment, and he stood within the room, and before the woman he loved.

A low, stifled cry fell from her lips. Then—pale, haughty, amazed—she rose from her seat, and confronted him. He saw her in the full light of the clear sunshine, as it fell through the windows and lingered on the dark folds of her velvet dress, on the dusky gold of her hair, on all the beauty of face and form so perfect in its womanly grace, its queenly dignity.

"Raoul!"

The name fell from her lips almost unconsciously, but he heard it, and the sound of her voice and the sight of her face swept over his heart with a sudden storm of passionate joy that robbed him of all self-control. With a swift, impetuous movement he was beside her, his head uncovered, his eyes blind, his senses dizzy, with the force and strength of a power he had never recognised so fully as now—the power of a woman's presence,—the sound of a woman's voice. Till he saw her again, he had not known how eager had been his quest, how strong his memory, how intense his love. Now, as he bent before her presence as a subject to a queen, as his lips touched her hand, and his eyes looked into hers once more, a rapturous joy thrilled his frame, such as in all his life before he had never known, such as in all his life again he never would know, save for this one woman who had taught him *love*.

What he said he never knew. He had longed for her so often in his exile, in his solitude, in his grief; and now she was here beside him—free, untrammelled—pure with all her girlhood's purity, perfect with all a woman's grace—a thousand times more beautiful, a thousandfold more dear than when he had seen her last.

In the senseless madness of his joy, his love spoke out at last; he kissed her hands, her dress, with rapturous glad relief; he

poured out in wild, incoherent words the story of his long search, the secret of his long love ; and she—she stood there with her heart throbbing fast and fierce, the colour flushing and paling in her cheeks, while his words held her spell-bound and amazed, and the shadows of the room seemed to sweep like eddying waters round and round her, and a darkness as of sudden night to close over her senses, and steal away her life.

Then suddenly the floodgates of memory were opened, sense and feeling swept back to her again. A tide of burning colour flushed her face, her brow, her neck, and she wrenched herself from his touch, and signed him back with a gesture, grand as scorn and outraged pride and womanly dignity could make it.

“ You ! ”

It was but one word, but it held such contempt, such scorn, that it startled Raoul and calmed his passion, his joy, his sudden forgetfulness of all save her. He looked at her in wonder, startled out of all ordinary composure, and he saw before him no longer a gentle, trusting girl, but a woman wronged and injured, and fenced round with the barriers of a pride greater even than his own.

“ Why are you here ? ” she asked calmly, as he stood before her abashed and silenced, wondering what he had done that this girl should treat him as an intruder. “ The world is surely wide enough to keep your path apart from mine ! Have you not heard I admit no one to my presence here ! Least of all do I care to see one who brings back memories so hateful as those connected with *Renonçeux* ! ”

Raoul was too utterly amazed for any words. What sort of reception was this ? What had he done to be so treated by the girl he had longed to serve and to aid with all his heart and soul ?

“ Vivienne ! ” he said, in pained astonishment, “ what do you mean ? How have I offended you ? ”

“ Mean ! ” she said bitterly, as she turned her eyes from his pleading face. “ Mean ! I mean that I wish my life now to be wholly free from any memory of the past. When I left France I voluntarily resigned all claims, all rights, all associations connected with it. I have no wish for any one to recall them to my mind again. My wishes are so well known that I scarcely think you have intruded on my privacy by fair means, *Monsieur de Verdreuil* ! ”

“ Good heavens, Vivienne ! ” cried Raoul, pained and wounded inexpressibly by her tone, her words, her strange reception. “ What is the reason of this ? Is the *past* to go for nothing ? Have you no memory of our friendship, no thought of what we were *then* ? Or have I offended you in any way ? Surely, if you allow Albert Hoffmann to resume your acquaintance, you cannot

blame me for wishing to do the same. I have searched and sought for you unceasingly, ever since I heard that you had left Renonçeux, and *that* I never knew until Blanche de Verdreuil's death."

"Death!" cried Vivienne, her face growing very white as she heard it, "Blanche dead! and I never knew it!"

"I suppose not, since you resolutely exclude all messengers and acquaintances of the outer world from your presence," said Raoul. "Will you allow me to tell you of the important discoveries arising from her death? They concern you very nearly."

"Concern *me*!" said Vivienne haughtily. "How, monsieur?"

"I must first tell you that your old nurse, Manon Beauvoir, confided to Blanche de Verdreuil a desk and a ring belonging to your mother, which were the sole possessions you brought with you to Renonçeux. What passed between them previous to your accepting the guardianship of the late countess I am not in a position to state. Whatever it was, Blanche took a base and unfair advantage of it, and kept the whole matter concealed from every one until her death, when all her papers came into my possession, and among them these letters and this will. Perhaps you would like to read them for yourself?"

Vivienne took them from his hands, pale and trembling with agitation—took them and read their contents slowly and carefully, while over her proud loveliness came a flush of eager feeling, of intense relief, of passionate, incredulous joy, that changed it as by a miracle.

Suddenly she let the papers fall, and looked up at Raoul with a strange, dizzy bewilderment, as of one waking from a long trance that might have been death, yet is mercifully changed to life.

"Is it possible? can this be true?" she murmured dreamily, "Renonçeux mine; my father Maurice de Verdreuil! surely I am dreaming, and shall wake to the old misery and the old shame that has never left me since *she* spoke those cruel words!"

"Vivienne," said Raoul earnestly, as he came and stood beside her in the soft glow of the firelight; "Vivienne, it is all true, every word. At Bologna we found more proofs of the reality of this strange history; at Renonçeux you are known and accepted as the heiress and mistress of it all. Do you wonder now that I sought you far and wide, intent only upon one thing, to repair the wrong we have unwittingly done you all these years?"

"And you are my cousin!" she said, looking wonderingly up at him. How strange it all is! I cannot realize the truth yet."

"I suppose not," said Raoul gently; "it must seem incredible to you at present. And now that I have explained all this, will you forgive me for intruding upon you, as you accused me of doing a little while ago? and will you tell me, Vivienne

why you were so cold and cruel in your greeting to one who has longed and laboured to serve you in all things as I have done?"

His question roused all her pride, all her memories of that time when he had said he left her because he knew she loved him. She thought of his coldness, his silence, his neglect; and as she thought of it, she hardened her heart against him now, remembering that his keen sense of honour and of justice would alone have prompted him to serve her, once he knew of their relationship, once he deemed her the mistress and possessor of all that had once been his, and was his no longer.

Very proud and calm she looked, as she raised her head and glanced quietly up at the grave, earnest face above her.

"I am sorry I was discourteous," she said, speaking just as coldly and calmly as she might have spoken to the merest stranger. "My ignorance of our relationship must plead my excuse."

"By heaven, Vivienne!" cried Raoul, with sudden passionate wrath, as the sting of those cruel words tortured his heart beyond endurance, "if I thought that this newly-discovered relationship was the only reason why you tolerated my society, I would never look upon your face again!"

She was silent for a moment; her heart throbbed fast, her hands clasped each other more tightly as they lay on her lap. Those wild, impulsive words were at once sweet and painful to her, but still she doubted that he loved her. She had grown so accustomed to that belief, she had so schooled and tortured herself into accepting it, that she could not shake it off now at once.

"What would you have me say?" she asked coldly. "I tell you plainly, when I left Renonçeux it was with the hope I might never see it or any one belonging to it again. You look incredulous; do you suppose I have any great cause for gratitude to any one of my race? Did not my own father wrong me in the first instance? Did not your father's wife aid and abet that wrong as far as lay in her power? Have I any reason to thank her for what has happened? Look at what my life has been, what her protection made it! Placed in a false position, denied even a name, a birthright of honour, and then flung on the world to perish or not as I pleased! Is it any wonder that I feel small interest or affection for any one of you *now*? Your own act is but common justice. Are you going to claim any reward for it? or are you, too, incapable of being disinterested?"

The cold, contemptuous words stung Raoul to the heart. That ever Vivienne should so speak and act was to him a thing incomprehensible.

"You are sadly changed," he said, looking at her with mingled

pain and wonder. "I never thought to hear your lips utter anything so cruel or unjust. At least, whatever wrong Blanche de Verdreuil did to you, it is scarcely fair to blame me for it. I have done my best to atone, God knows !"

She was silent, but her heart was steeling itself against persuasion. She would not pardon him ; she would not believe in him. If he had loved her, would he have made her name a jest to be bandied about among his associates ? would he have left her without a word ? would he have neglected her so long ? No, he only said these words because he knew her to be well-born, wealthy, the mistress of his home. While she was nameless, dependent, obscure, he had neglected, and perhaps despised her. Was this half-hearted conduct worthy of being called *love* ?

"I daresay I am changed," she said in the same constrained, unnatural voice. "I have had enough to change me, enough to make me doubt the existence of faith, love, and honour. The life I have led is not one to keep a girl in the same belief that my heart held when the world and I were as yet strangers to one another."

"I know your life has been a hard one," he said gently—he could be patient with her still, for the sake of his love—"but it will be brighter now ; the future before you is a bright and a noble one. Let that teach you forgetfulness of the past."

Over her face there swept a look of pain.

"Nothing can teach me *that*," she said ; "nothing can give me back the peace, the faith, the simple, unquestioning joy of my life as it was when that false woman poisoned it with her cruel words. Do you know," she added, speaking in a low, passionate voice that thrilled to Raoul's very heart—"do you know that the night I fled from Renonçeux I was desperate, I was almost mad ? I prayed for death as in all my life I never thought to pray, even for any good or happy thing ; and had I died, *she* would have been my murderess ! She did not kill the life that was in me ; no ! that was a mercy too great ; but she gave me to a worse misery. I have never known one glad or peaceful moment since."

Raoul looked at her, his whole heart stirred and shaken by the greatness of his love—the vastness of his pity for the sufferings her sinless innocence had known and borne so long.

"If I had only known it !" he muttered hoarsely. "Oh, my darling, if I could have saved you from this !"

She smiled—a cold, careless smile that pained him infinitely more than words.

"*You* ? I never thought you had any remembrance of me at all !"

"No remembrance! To have lost that, Vivienne, I must first have lost life. Why do you think so ill of me?"

"I do not think ill of you," she said, with the same calm indifference; "only you seemed to have but little thought of me when you were with us at Renonçeux. I can hardly imagine absence being favourable to any deeper interest you might have had in my welfare."

"I dared not tell you, I dared not breathe it then," he said, with a new and sudden softness in his voice, for the presence of this girl filled his whole soul with a sweet, strange joy that had never touched him before. "But your welfare and your happiness were and are dearer a thousandfold to me than those of any living being. I would have gone to the world's end to serve you, Vivienne."

"I think you did *that*," she said quietly, "though whether to serve me, or not, I do not pretend to know. Certainly you took a strange and most unusual way of showing your friendship and zeal in my welfare while I was the poor dependent of the Countess de Verdreuil's bounty. Of course, since you have discovered my claim on your interest, my relationship to yourself, it is different. I do not question your trouble or your exertions on my behalf since you knew *who I am*."

Raoul turned on her a face colourless as death. The passion and the patience of his nature were still blended together; reproach her he would not, though her words stung him to the quick.

"Do you think, then," he said proudly, "that only because of your present position, only because of your descent from my own race, your claim upon my kinship, that only for these have I sought to serve you? You little know how you wrong me, Vivienne."

"With what other motives should I credit you?" she asked, not daring to lift her eyes to the grave, pained face of the man she loved, though she dared not confess it. "I judge you by your actions; clearer evidence of the truth of my words is scarcely needed!"

"Believe what you may," he said earnestly; "but at least believe that I have loved you, Vivienne—loved you as never had I thought of loving any woman on this earth. You wound me beyond measure when you say such cruel words as those you have just uttered!"

For a moment she was silent, struggling with the doubts that tortured her, impatient, distrustful, yet half inclined to believe him, to give him the old faith, the old trust once more.

"I do not wish to pain you," she said more gently; "least of all now, when I know how much *you* lose by all I gain. I would willingly restore Renonçeux to you if I could; I know how dearly

you love it. My one wish has been gratified ; I know that on the names I love, all reverence and all honour rest ; with that I am content. As for the wealth, the heritage that goes with this knowledge, I care so little for them that I could pray of you to take them back again—to look upon Renonçeux as still your own. You are more worthy of its honours than I am, and it seems hard that you should twice lose it for—a woman ! ”

He heard her silently, while a new pain gathered in his heart, and slowly shaped itself into certainty. She did not love him—he felt assured of that—and she deemed him base and mean enough to seek her only for the wealth she would bring, the possessions she would own, the home she could restore to him. His pride rose in arms at that thought. A woman who had loved him would have had greater faith than this. If Vivienne could believe that he sought her merely as the heiress of Renonçeux, she could care but little for him ; she could have none of that love and faith to give, without which her heart was valueless.

He answered her at last with a cold, serene composure, wholly unlike his previous gentleness,—

“ What you offer is impossible ; you must know that as well as I do ; and since you do me such wrong as to suppose I only sought you for your new station, I can well imagine how little sincerity my words must have seemed to bear. There are some things a man cannot hear twice, even from a woman. Whatever I have felt for you had better be as completely forgotten as though I had never been foolish enough to betray it. I thank you for reminding me that the beggared cousin has no right to woo the heiress of Renonçeux ! ”

Those calm, proud words fell like lead on the girl's tortured heart. Why could she not believe him—trust him still ? Why ? Oh, heavens ? women are so hard to comprehend sometimes !

She answered nothing ; she shrank and cowered down in the play and glow of the firelight, feeling that her words had worked this deadly sorrow for their lives, and that he would never forget or forgive them. She knew she had never loved him as she loved him in that moment when the proud, fearless dignity of his face confuted her unworthy suspicions better even than his words. She glanced up at last, but he looked so cold, so stern now, that a great, chilling fear swept over her. Whether he loved her or not, he would never speak to her again such words as those she had scorned and refused to believe, in the shame of her wounded pride, her half-hearted faith.

“ Well, I must not trespass on your time,” he said at length, breaking the silence that had fallen on them both. “ All further arrangements concerning your property can be arranged with the lawyers, who at present hold the deeds and manage the estate. This is their address in Paris. These papers I of course leave

with you. If you have any further need of me, I shall be at your service—our relationship at least demands that. For the rest—may others serve you better than I have done, and prove more worthy of what I have lost! You shall not see my face again unless—you—wish it.”

The passion in his eyes had deepened to despair, but his voice was calm, cold, unmoved. He was so deeply hurt, so deeply pained, that his self-control made him appear unnaturally composed, and yet the heavy throbs of his heart beat almost audibly on the stillness, and his face was colourless as marble. She could not speak; she sat as if carved in stone—mute, desolate, voiceless with the anguish of her heart. She dared not look up, only because she dreaded to read the sentence written on his face; but he thought it was because she neither pitied his pain, nor desired his presence.

Without another word, another look, he turned and left her.

And Vivienne? She still sat there—motionless as a statue of despair—her clasped hand resting in her lap, the play of the rising and falling flames from the wood-fire on the hearth lighting up the stony misery of her face. Her eyes never stirred from the red embers before her, her head was never raised from its drooping, weary attitude.

The memory of a madness worse than death was upon her, the madness which had cast away a love priceless, exhaustless, true. She thought and thought till her thoughts grew into an unmeaning chaos, till her brain ached with the misery of its own unending pain.

The world had taught her much, but she had yet to learn that a woman's love, to be love at all, must be patient, enduring, long-suffering—must eschew doubts and hold to faith—ay, and have pity and pardon for every sin, boundless as the mercy of heaven.

CHAPTER VI.

TESTED AND TRIED.

“She said, I am weary, weary,
I would that I were dead!”

THE remainder of that day passed in an agony of self-reproach, and grief and shame for Vivienne. Once she had thought that only to have the mystery of her birth cleared, her name one of honour in the sight of the world, would be the greatest happi-

ness her life could know. Now she had gained this wish, and with it wealth, dignity, greatness ; and yet her heart was heavier, crushed beneath a greater misery than any she had imagined.

At times she wondered whether she had been mad to say such words to Raoul de Verdreuil as she had said ; at other moments the pride and shame of the love she had fought with so long, came sweeping back in waves of misery over her heart, and whispered she had only done as any other woman would have done. Had not Raoul de Verdreuil left her forgotten, unnoticed, unsought ? Had he ever breathed a word beyond friendship of the calmest, coldest nature, in those days when he might have won her by a word ? Had he not avoided her—treated her with studied coldness and neglect—left her on the occasion of his leaving Renonçeux without even the courtesy of a farewell ?

The more she thought of it the more convinced she became that she had acted rightly ; he had wooed her as the mistress of Renonçeux, the wealthy, titled heiress, promising himself an easy victory by the memory of her past weakness, her unconscious self-betrayal. He thought to find the same trusting, simple-minded girl in Vivienne de Verdreuil as in Vivienne St. Maurice. He had found his mistake now. Had she been still friendless, nameless, obscure, and he had come to seek her, and woo her for his bride, she would have deemed him disinterested ; but it was far otherwise, their positions were reversed, and she could not forget that his love—if love it was—had only sprung to life with her assumed position and her new dignity as Countess of Renonçeux.

And yet he had seemed in earnest ; his gladness at meeting her had surely been unfeigned, and in spite of pride she longed, even now, to hear the passionate accents of that voice, the thrill of those silent kisses, the wordless tenderness of the great love which had shone in his eyes when they rested on her face again.

“It is too late ! too late !” she said, as she rose from her drooping attitude by the fire, hours after Raoul had left her. “I am so changed now, I seem to have lost all love and faith in every human thing, and yet—once—I loved him so !”

The gladness of that love had died out of her life when distrust and suspicion had entered. From the hour that a woman's words had laid bare before her the secret of her heart, had made it a thing for mockery and jest, Vivienne had deemed her love a shame. The simple, unquestioning joy, the purity of a faith, at once perfect and complete, had been blasted in a single moment by the scorn and reproach of a woman's jealous hate, a woman's vindictive insults. And now—now she could not recall it—she could not believe in it again ; it seemed a thing so utterly of the past ; it had died in the horror of that moment when she believed

herself to be a creature whose only heritage was shame, whose greatest crime existence—when a worse horror than death had seized and crushed her life in the first sweet summer of its years.

Blanche de Verdreuil had done many evil things in the course of her life, but she had never done a worse or more cruel deed than when she told the friendless, innocent girl she had promised to protect, the lie that had wrecked her happiness and destroyed her peace for ever.

While the slow, weary hours of the day dragged on to evening, while the old Italian lady wondered at the changed looks and listless attitude, and indifferent manner of her charge, Vivienne fought with the slow despair, the sorrowful tenderness of her ceaseless regrets. He would never return to her again—of that she felt sure. He could not forgive her scorn, her coldness, her neglect, her disbelief ; and she knew that his love was to her above all price, above all other joys that earth could give. And yet she had refused it, had distrusted it—had lost it for evermore. Why?

Answer this, women who are weak, women who are proud, foolish, exacting—doubting ever, trusting never, till the great and priceless gifts of love are gone from you beyond all power of recall ! Answer it, you whose hearts are too faint, too weak, to believe all you cannot understand—who have arrogated to yourselves a right to receive all a man's devotion, a man's homage, and yet can mistrust and wrong him by a thousand petty fears and doubts which he may be too proud to explain, too generous to reproach !

But reason does not tarry with love, nor love with reason, or surely men's lives—ay, and women's too—would not hold such tragic ends, such woe and pain and misery, as we see and know they do. Is love ever perfected without suffering—complete without pain ? Do the jest and the woe, the laughter and the sighs, lie so close together for no purpose—for no graver teaching, for no higher end than we behold ?

Ah no ! That love alone is blest whose full and rich perfection we look for in another world, where age cannot chill, nor time disenchant, nor God Himself unsever it.

That only is love which is greater than death, and boundless as eternity.

* * * *

When evening fell, Raoul and Albert were once more together ; and in a few cold words the young count told his friend the history of that interview with Vivienne ; and at last the veil of silence was removed—at last, in those few pained sentences, Raoul bared his heart to his friend's loving eyes, and poured out its

nopeless passion in words such as Albert had never heard him utter in all his life before.

A storm of mingled emotions surged in the young artist's mind as he listened. At first it was almost with relief that he heard how all the joy and sweetness of the love he valued more than life was not even for Raoul to win. Then he blamed himself most bitterly for thoughts so selfish and disloyal. But the pain of his own unquenchable passion burned still in his heart—he *could* not forget what Vivienne was to him.

In a moment, however, he recovered himself, hating, with fierce, intolerable hatred, the momentary weakness of his nature—the weakness that had made him false to his friend even by a thought. As Raoul ceased speaking, he lifted his white face from his hands and looked at him with such infinite pity and tenderness, that it spoke more plainly than any words his perfect sympathy.

Raoul de Verdreuil knew then that even this most cruel test of man's friendship was powerless to affect the true and faithful love which reigned between them. Truly it was love "passing the love of woman"—a love that prompted Albert to generous self-abandonment of all his long hopes and desires, and gave him strength to comfort and encourage Raoul in the midst of his despair.

For Albert felt almost convinced that Vivienne loved his friend. He remembered how changed she seemed after the sudden departure of the young count from Renonçeux—how she had resolutely and firmly refused all offers of marriage, however brilliant, and how she had ever sought for news, or word of Raoul, with an eagerness and anxiety altogether unusual to her. Then, too, he remembered that every mention of Raoul's name of late had agitated her beyond anything else, and that, although she shrank from questioning Albert about his friend, yet she had listened with ill-concealed interest to whatever he said of him—listened silently, it is true, but with fitful colour and wavering spirits for long after. The more he thought of it, the more convinced he became that some unexplained cause lay at the bottom of this misunderstanding—some doubt, some mystery of the past which neither of them would nor *could* explain yet.

And then with a sudden abnegation of self, with a chivalrous resolve to seek the happiness of the two friends he loved best on earth, Albert determined that he would seek the cause of their voluntary separation—their inexplicable distrust—and, if possible, set doubts and fears at rest for ever, and clear away the shadows that obscured their love. It was a hard task for one who loved as he loved Vivienne, but Albert sought her happiness before his own; he was so utterly, so perfectly, unselfish, that to see Vivienne content and blessed at last was all the reward he sought

from life, now he knew her love was never to be his—had never been his even for a single moment.

"Ah, Raoul!" he said at last, when out of the chaos of thoughts all shapeless and confused, this one resolve stood clear and distinct before him; "I thought a day would come when you too would learn, love is not a jest, a mere name, an idle pastime, but a power so mighty that no reasoning can overthrow, no strength defy, no pride or coldness conquer it. I wish you may not learn the lesson too late. I trust its teaching may not give you such suffering always."

"I shall never win her now," said Raoul sadly. "She thinks I only pretended love because she is the possessor of all that I once thought mine—because she is great and wealthy and powerful. Oh! I would that she were only once more the pretty, careless, innocent child I saw in the woods of Renonçeux so many summers ago!"

"I have given her all I have," he continued presently, "my whole heart, my whole love—and yet I know she is lost to me for ever! One cannot hear such words twice from a woman's lips as she spoke to me to-day. I am too proud to plead what she will never believe, the disinterestedness of my love. I cannot lie at a woman's feet and sue for her smiles for ever. Were my life ever so lonely, my heart ever so desolate, they still have duties, ambitions, hopes beyond my present misery. I must just go forth again, to the fight and the struggle—only now they seem harder and more wearisome than before."

"You have been so brave in every trial, Raoul," said Albert gently; "you must bring the same courage to help you bear this. I cannot believe Vivienne meant to be cruel or unjust; but you must remember how hard her life has been, how much she has had to teach her suspicion and distrust. What a lonely, desolate life for a young girl to lead has been her life for the last two years! It has changed her—I know that—but still the true heart, the warm, impulsive sympathy, the generous instincts have not left her. In many things she is altered; you cannot wonder that it is so; but in others she is as pure, as faithful, as loveable as the innocent child we knew so long ago. I believe, Raoul, she loves you despite all you have told me, and if ever a day comes when she feels she has wronged you by a suspicion or a doubt you did not deserve, she will not hesitate to tell you of her fault, and strive to make amends for it. So much do I know of her—so well do I judge her nature."

"And, Albert," said Raoul gently, as he looked at the fair, boyish face, so steadfast in its heroic purpose, "do you grudge me the gift of her love, should I ever obtain it, should a time ever come when her doubts are proved to be unworthy, when I know I may love her in all faith, in all tenderness again."

"Would you have grudged it to me, Raoul?" was the gentle reply. "It is no question of who loves her best, or who is worthiest of her; it is simply which of us *she* loves, and in whom her heart's best happiness is concerned. You would not envy me, nor do I envy you, the possession of that love. The choice rests with her alone—for the rest, God will do with our lives as seems to Him best."

And Raoul de Verdreuil knew in that moment that his friend's love was nobler, purer than his own.

A silence fell on both.

Their thoughts travelled back to the years that had passed, to the friendship begun in boyhood—perfected in manhood; rooted and grounded in the simplest and most perfect trust of each in each. Even the woman they both loved had no power to break it *now*. Though she had dealt to them the heaviest misery of their lives, they yet found comfort in each other's sympathy. Ere they parted that night, all jealousy was at rest for evermore; their confidence was perfect and complete as though no shadow had ever crossed, no silence ever approached it, and yet their friendship had never borne a stronger test than that night had witnessed.

To Albert a moment of supreme temptation had come, and he had conquered it. He was loyal to the trust bestowed, the confidence reposed in him. He put away all thought of self for ever, from the moment that he knew Raoul loved Vivienne, and remembered that she too might love him. The strength and force of that faithful friendship swept all base or selfish thoughts, all instincts of passion, for ever from his heart; the hour for which he had so often prayed, the hour that could try the truth of his allegiance, was here at last, and all the tenderness of his nature, the purity and nobility of his soul, answered to the demand made upon them. He left Raoul with but one purpose in his heart, an earnest, steadfast resolve that would live with his life henceforward—the purpose of reconciling these two who loved yet doubted, who suffered yet endured, for the sake of that one great fault in the nature and the heart of each—pride.

The world is full of such things—of faith killed by doubts, of love misplaced and hopeless; of hearts that ache for their own weakness, and lives condemned to sorrow for their own self-will; of all the madness and the misery of that one sweet, passionate folly that men call—Love. And yet we live and smile, while the sun shines on its way, and the world drags on its days, and hearts beat, though every throb is pain and anguish unutterable. The world is full of such things, and yet men are not mad!

One wonders that it is so every day that dawns.

CHAPTER VII.

KEEPING FAITH.

“Love took up the harp of Life, and smote on all the chords with might :

Smote the chord of Self, that trembling passed in music out of sight.”

Two days had passed, and Vivienne began to wonder why she had neither seen nor heard anything of Albert Hoffmann.

She had taken no steps whatever in the matter of her newly-discovered heiress-ship ; she never wrote to the lawyers ; she made no inquiries concerning Renonçeux ; she just let the time slip listlessly, languidly by, with neither heart nor care, nor interest for anything. On the night of the second day following those unexpected discoveries, she had to appear at the opera. Her engagement held her to the end of the spring, and she resolved nothing would induce her to break it. Till Albert's opera was produced, she would not leave the stage, though she were twenty times a countess—a determination, of course, which no one knew of but herself, and a resolve which first amazed and then angered Madame Pitteri, when Vivienne told her of it.

Vivienne grew sadly impatient as Albert still kept aloof. Did he know of her changed prospects ? had he and Raoul met ? Surely, yes. But why did he not come, if such was the case ? She grew perplexed and grieved, the more she thought of it, and resolved at last that she would send for him if he did not call at the villa next day.

She went to the opera at the usual time, feeling, for once in her life, careless and indifferent as to how she acted. Her eyes swept over the theatre again and again, in the hopes of seeing him. She would not confess she had thought it barely possible that Raoul might be there also, but neither of the two friends were visible among the audience, and a strange, chilling sense of disappointment, altogether new to her, robbed her acting of its graceful charm, its perfect self-possession, and made her abstracted, preoccupied, and at times nervous.

She was thankful when the time came for her to go home, and the lighted theatre and enthusiastic plaudits were at last left behind.

The night was clear as day as she drove through the streets of Florence. All the city slept, silvery and still, beneath the moon-rays ; only now and then two shadows paused beneath some dusky archway, to murmur a last good-night, or a woman's face looked out from some open casement, or a lover waited below some dim, shadowy balcony, while a girl's graceful figure leaned above, and

from her hand a flower dropped softly down—a token mute and eloquent as love itself.

Vivienne saw this with a new regret, a passionate longing for like joys, for like tenderness, that wrung her heart with sudden, intolerable pain. She buried her face in her hands; she would not look out again at the sweet, poetic idyls of love and peace, with which she had nothing in common now. She strove to forget that such love, such sweet, rapturous joy might have been hers, had not her own folly, her own pride, rejected it. In the dreamy, midnight hour, with the quiet stars shining so softly in the deep blue of the cloudless sky, she knew her own heart better than she had known it before. She murmured passionately, "What mattered whether he were worthy? If love be of any worth, he would have been with me *now*."

It was her loneliness, the aching void of heart and soul, which nothing but love could satisfy, that oppressed her. She had been alone so long—so long—and the woman on the balcony, the leaning shadows in the dusky archway—they could taste the joy and feel the dreamy sorcery of that one word—"together."

"Shall I ever forget? shall I ever, ever forget?" she cried in passionate regret. "Why did I shut my ears to his pleading, my heart to his prayers? Did I think in my pride, my half-hearted faith, that any man's love would come up to my ideal standard? Does a woman ever find a faith that has never wavered, a heart that has never changed? If even Blanche de Verdreuil's words were true, if he loved her *then*, if for her sake he lost his father's trust, his own heritage, at least he *seemed* to love me when he spoke of the past, when he pleaded for the future. And I might have been content with that. I might have known that a woman's love must be humble, patient, enduring, ere it is worth anything to a man. Are they ever true as we are true? Does one faith, one passion, hold them unchangeable till death? Ah, no! ah, no! It seems to me I have yearned after impossible virtues; have idealized impossible greatness, when I thought to find a heart that had held no other love as mine has done. Albert, at least, has given me an undivided allegiance, but yet I cannot love him."

She lay back in her carriage, faint, weary, spent; her proud eyes dim with tears, her face white and weary with the pain at her heart, and the fruitless longings of a love that she told herself was dead—lost—a thing of the past. In the solitude and silence of the midnight hour she grew more humble; she had no thought, no consciousness, of anything but her love. Had Raoul been with her then to plead his cause, to set her doubts at rest, he would have seen her eyes grow tender with an infinite tenderness, the deeper and the purer because of the lesson she was learning—the lesson that disarms a woman's pride by the greatness of her love.

The carriage stopped. She was at the entrance of her villa once more. In the grey, shadowy haze of the early morning, she passed through the grounds and entered the hall, where a lamp burned in readiness for her. She took it in her hand and entered the sitting-room, carelessly tossing her cashmere wraps on a low couch as she advanced to the fire.

The room was quite deserted, but, ere she touched the bell, her maid came in to inquire whether she required anything, and to bring her a letter which had arrived during her absence.

Vivienne took it carelessly from the salver where it lay, and then seated herself on a low chair before the hearth.

"You need not wait, Madelon," she said: "I need nothing, and it is very late. I suppose Madame has gone to bed long ago?"

The girl answered in the affirmative and then retired, leaving her young mistress alone, as she had desired.

Vivienne opened the letter—it was from Raoul de Verdreuil.

As she read the signature, the blood rushed in rosy torrents over her face and brow, and in her agitation the words and letters swam in a dim confused mass before her eyes. Then as she grew more calm, she read it slowly and carefully, as though each word were precious beyond price. And yet it was short and simple enough—merely a few courteous sentences at best.

Raoul said that he was obliged to leave Florence, as he had received a message from the Embassy, requiring his attendance in Paris immediately; that he wished Vivienne to make any arrangements she pleased connected with the château, but as he thought she might need an agent more versed in business-matters than Albert, and more trustworthy and reliable than a stranger, he had ordered his secretary, Carlo Viotti, to call on her as soon as he returned from Bologna with the papers relative to her birth, and if she pleased to make use of him as her agent she would find him in all respects capable of managing her affairs, as well as faithful in trust, and unflinching in zeal. "I fear you may think me officious in interfering with or advising you," he said in conclusion; "but I cannot bear to think of your friendless and solitary position; and as there will be a great deal of trouble and perhaps annoyance connected with these events, I should feel more at rest if I knew you had some one to take the trouble off your hands, and on whom you could thoroughly depend. Do not, however, consider yourself in any way bound to respect my wishes on the subject. I do but advise you as I think best for your own convenience and comfort. But remember that you are your own mistress entirely, and can appoint any one you please to act for you. The lawyers in Paris will of course need to see the certificate Viotti brings from Bologna,

also the will and the papers I left with you, had better be returned to them. As these proofs are valuable, you had better transmit them to Paris by a safe hand, unless you go thither yourself. Albert will call on you to-morrow, as I have begged him to help you in any way he possibly can. You will find that being an heiress demands a great deal of attention to matters about which you have hitherto troubled yourself very little."

Vivienne laid the letter down, her eyes brimming over with tears.

"How good he is!" she murmured low and tenderly, as she folded it up again, and held it gently and carefully, as though it were indeed most precious, in her hand. "How thoughtful and careful of me in spite of everything! Oh, if I have wronged him! if I have misjudged him after all, how shall I ever forgive myself?"

That night she slept with the letter resting on her heart, and on her face was a light of peace and tenderness long a stranger to it.

* * * *

The hours passed; the night faded. The rays of the morning slowly stole through the narrow casements of the Villa Constanza. Vivienne awoke with a smile on her lips, for she had been dreaming of Raoul, and in that dream it seemed all doubts and fears had been set at rest. They loved—they were together!

Ah! if dreams were only real—if they were ever anything but a mockery of all we long for and never obtain—of all we seek and never find!

She rose and dressed herself hastily, for the sun was high, and she remembered Albert was to come that morning. It was just mid-day when he arrived, and the moment she greeted him she knew that Raoul had told him all. The knowledge made her greeting so cold and constrained that Albert grew uneasy. His task would be a harder one than he had imagined, he thought, for the grave, proud dignity with which Vivienne fenced herself in was a barrier against all attempts at gaining her confidence, and Albert was too great a novice in women's ways to read in that very pride and coldness, the certainty of his own suspicions. It is only when a woman knows herself weak that she is so unnaturally proud and cold, so tenacious of her dignity, so fearful of any approach to the subject nearest her heart.

She fenced most skilfully with all Albert's attempts to introduce Raoul's name, and yet her heart throbbed and her pulses quickened at every mention of it. But the young man was determined not to leave her till he ascertained something of the cause and nature of her rejection of his friend; and at last, when all hints had failed to achieve the desired object, he came boldly to the point by asking her whether she would return soon to Rønøceux or not. ~~she refused~~

"Raoul wishes it," he said earnestly, "and, Vivienne, I think you ought to leave the stage now; your position demands it; and of course, though you will have to pay the forfeit-money for breaking your engagement, that is of no consequence to you now."

Vivienne looked at him in astonishment.

"Leave the stage because of this! forego my engagement, my promise to you, Albert? Never! Not if I were fifty times Countess of Renonçieux!"

"Oh, Vivienne!" said the young artist eagerly, "don't think of me, don't consider that promise for a moment. I would sacrifice all my hopes of fame sooner than you should do anything you may repent of hereafter. And, Vivienne, I am sure Raoul would not like it. He seemed to think you would give up the stage immediately. If you stop here till the spring, I am sure it will annoy him very much. Pray consider it, and make up your mind to act as he wishes.

"What are Raoul's wishes to me?" said the girl proudly. "He is not my guardian; I can act as I please; and, Albert," she continued, speaking more gently as she saw his distressed look, "I have made up my mind that your opera shall be produced, come what may. And not only that, but I mean to act in it. Who will do such justice to the heroine? who will take such interest in the character as I shall? Have I not studied and perfected myself in it for the last six months. You foolish boy! you are pleading against your own interest by advising me to give it up now."

Albert flushed slightly.

"How generous you are—how good?" he said warmly. "I scarcely think another woman in the world would act in this manner at such a time. But, Vivienne, have you no thought or care for your altered position? You scarcely seem to trouble about it at all."

She was silent for a moment.

"I am glad that my name is an honourable and stainless one—that my birthright is beyond reproach. As for all else I have gained, it is nothing to me now."

She spoke so sadly, so regretfully, that Albert became more than ever convinced his suspicions were correct. Young, fair, gifted—standing on the threshold of a new life—why should she care so little for it unless, as he suspected, she knew its best gifts were nothing without love, without a heart at peace, a mind untroubled?

"You should not say that, Vivienne," he said softly. "A great and noble life may be yours; its duties and responsibilities are not given you only for your own pleasure, or to suit your own inclinations. Every heart has its own burden of bitterness to

bear ; and though your trials of the past may have dimmed and sobered many of your anticipations, I cannot but think the future will make amends for it. And, Vivienne," he continued, more gently and tenderly still, " I cannot help seeing there is some unhappiness weighing down your heart. I do not seek your confidence if you have no wish to bestow it, but I wish you would trust me and let me help you as though I were indeed your brother. Do not throw your life's best happiness away because of a pride that is foolish and unjust, because of a faith that has asked too much. Your wrongs may be only fancied, your doubts a word might heal."

" Oh, hush ! " she said entreatingly ; " you do not know, Albert, you do not know."

" What do I not know ? " he asked, in the same gentle voice, though his heart bled inwardly with the torture of his own sufferings. " Do you think, Vivienne, that one who has known you so long, who has loved you so well as I have done, cannot read your heart better than you yourself ? Oh, Vivienne ! what has pride to do with love ? Is a man's whole life, his whole happiness, of such little account to you that you can afford to sacrifice it for a little doubt, a too exacting pride, a half-hearted faith, that is not worthy of the love it rejects ? What are women made of that they cannot feel for the madness and the misery they shower broadcast on the earth ? "

His eager, passionate words went home to the girl's proud heart all the more because she knew how unselfish was his pleading, how noble his devotion to his boyhood's friend : because she felt how deep was the pain of his own love as it battled with that for which he sought her pity.

" You plead his cause eloquently," she said, turning her face away from his earnest gaze. " Did he send you here for that purpose ? "

" Vivienne ! " cried Albert in pained astonishment, " how can you wrong him so ? "

" What I said I mean," she answered haughtily. " I do not look at words and promises, but at deeds and actions. What has he done to prove his sincerity ? Once he loved Blanche de Verdreuil—it was before the Count married her, true—but for all that her fascinations could sway and allure him still, and cost him his inheritance. Her death gave him, or seemed to give him, back what he had lost. Then came the discovery of this will, and he learns it is I who hold what he had long believed to be his own. In restoring it he has acted honourably, I allow, but he must have been false to every creed of his race, to every code of a gentleman's honour, if he had not done an act of simple justice to one who has been so deeply wronged. Oh, Albert ! " she cried, with a sudden burst of passionate tears, " if I could tear away

these empty honours he has thrust upon me, and cast them at his feet, I would do it gladly, cheerfully, only to stand before his sight as the nameless beggar-girl, the homeless orphan who first came to Renonçeux. Then I would know if indeed his words were true, if he would wed me, love me for myself alone, not for what I bring!"

"I *know* he would," said Albert. "Vivienne do you not think, by the light of my own feelings for you, I can read the truth of another man's heart? You wrong Raoul cruelly, you misjudge him deeply, if you think his love for you is not a passion, strong, faithful, steadfast as his own nature is—if you fancy for a single moment that he gave a thought to what you were, once he deemed you free to be wooed by himself. Vivienne, listen to me; it is God's truth I speak. I would willingly die to serve you—to make you happy—to save you pain; and it wrings my heart to see you wilfully disregarding a love, noble, true, and worthy of you, as that which Raoul has offered. He has loved you so long—only think how long, from the moment he saw you in Paris—and I know his life. I know his heart so well that I am convinced this tale of Blanche de Verdreuil's is entirely false. He would not be disloyal to me. I had told him of my secret long before he ever saw you, and therefore it was that he never spoke of love; he never whispered one word that might lead you to believe he loved you so long as he thought you cared for me. When he left Renonçeux so abruptly, it was because Blanche de Verdreuil told him you had confessed to her that you loved me, and on that same night his father, who had seen him talking to the countess, accused him of seeking to dishonour him in his old age. For these reasons you need not surely wonder at that strange, abrupt departure from the château: and you know well, Vivienne, that from *that* day forward chance robbed you both of all opportunity for any explanation on the subject. It was only when I confessed to Raoul how hopeless was my love, how all chance of winning you was over, that he showed me at last the secret of his own heart—the secret you never suspected through all these weary years, when he has suffered dishonour, exile, shame, for the falsehood and treachery of the woman who has done her best to poison our three lives. Oh, Vivienne! if you knew all he has borne, all he has endured—how his heart has been rent with agony, and yet how bravely and steadfastly he took up the burden of life and suffered in silence and alone, so that even I, his nearest and his truest friend, never for one moment suspected it—if you knew all this, surely, surely you would not wrong him by suspicions so ungenerous, so utterly unfounded as those which well nigh broke his heart when he left your presence last."

He ceased, and Vivienne was weeping bitterly now. All pride, all doubts, all wrong forgotten, she abandoned herself at that

moment to the full overmastering force of a grief passionate, self-accusing, remorseful.

How she had wronged him—that was all she thought—how cruelly she had wronged him ! She saw it all so plainly now—now, when it was too late. All the old perfect love and perfect faith of her childish days welled up in her heart again, forcing down the unbelief that had made her so cruel, and so scornful, when he had pleaded with her for faith in his words and trust in his truth. A tempest of sobs shook her slight frame ; all the self-command, the fierce restraint she had placed on her feelings of late gave way utterly now. She forgot Albert's presence, she forgot her own pride ; she only remembered all she had lost by her own folly. She learnt, in the full awakening of a woman's passion, the torture and the suffering of a woman's love.

"He has gone away believing me so proud, so worthless ! He will think I am not worthy of his love. Oh, Albert ! I am the most wretched woman in all the world."

"Ah, Vivienne !" said the young artist sadly, "why were you not more true to yourself ? Why did you falsify your whole nature to make you seem unworthy ?"

Her head sank on her hands ; her pride was broken and abased at last. She only thought how she had wronged the noble heart whose love had been all her own.

Albert watched her silently. He knew now he had judged her rightly ; he knew why all his devotion, all his worship, had failed to win her love—the love that had been given long ago to the friend he had sworn to serve at any cost.

The torments of jealousy had no place in his heart now. He had said rightly when he told Raoul that no question of who loved her best had ever arisen in his mind ; it was only whom *she* loved, and now he knew that without doubt ; and though he strove to be calm, to accept his fate, a heavy, deadly oppression lay on his heart ; the force and strength of the one great passionate love he had ever known battled fiercely against the leash of self-restraint.

As he saw her bowed down, weeping, remorseful, a great longing came over him to fall at her feet, to clasp her once more to his own aching heart, to kiss away the tears from those proud, lustrous eyes, hidden now for very shame and misery from his eager gaze.

But he restrained himself, though the hot blood rushed from his heart, flushing the worn, pallid outline of his cheek. His agony was greater than his strength ; he had not thought the task he set himself could be so severe, so perilous to himself. But Vivienne in her beauty, her loneliness, her grief, was more than he could resist ; yet if he spoke, or touched her now, he knew he would be false to the duty he had

sworn to accomplish, disloyal to the friend he loved only second to her

The sincerity, the fealty, the self-surrender, he had vowed were all so weak when weighed in the balance with a passion that throbbed in every pulse, that lived in every heart-beat. It took all his courage to battle with the temptings of his own nature, the whispers of his own passion ; and while that terrible conflict went on within him, the girl he loved so vainly, so unselfishly, was thinking only of herself, of Raoul, forgetting that the young artist had won back her faith and her trust in his friend at a cost so painful, so fearful to himself.

The red flush slowly faded from the wan, white face before her. Albert felt his eyes grow dim, his brain dizzy, with the agony he endured at that moment. He rose, slowly, feebly, with a strange, uncertain movement like that of a man smitten with sudden blindness in the light of the vivid, golden sunshine.

"I must leave you now," he said faintly, turning his face aside that she might not read his suffering. "I will come—soon—again."

Ere she could rise or speak, she saw him reel heavily forward—his arms outstretched to save himself ; then in an instant he lay on the ground at her feet, his face white and rigid as death, a crimson torrent rushing from his lips, dyeing the folds of her white dress with its fearful stains.

BOOK VIII.

CHAPTER I.

AS LAST YEAR'S ROSES.

“What though I die, I die content,
For 'tis for her—
Tis at her feet I die.”

THE wild, terrified shriek with which Vivienne saw Albert fall at her feet brought Madame Pitteri and Maruccio to the room.

“Oh, he is dying, I am sure he is dying!” cried the frightened girl, as she bent over the prostrate form, while still that awful crimson stream welled slowly over the ground, and the rigid features never relaxed from their death-like repose.

“He has broken a blood-vessel; you must send for a doctor!” said Madame Pitteri, who was the most composed and least alarmed of any.

“But do you think we should raise him?” said Vivienne, lifting her white, terrified face from where she knelt by Albert's side. “Oh, madame! it is so dreadful to see him lie here bleeding like this!”

“I scarcely like to move him,” said the old lady; “but haste, Maruccio! send Giâ for the doctor! He can take the horse, and tell him to fly—speed—make all haste!”

I saw the doctor pass here not ten minutes ago,” said Maruccio. “You know him, *signora*—the Doctor Florio who attends at the Villa Santilla up on the hill. Giâ can overtake him in a few moments, he is so fleet of foot.”

“Send him for heaven's sake, then!” said Vivienne impatiently. “While you talk, my friend is dying!”

The old woman left the room, and Vivienne and Madame Pitteri resumed their efforts at restoring the suspended animation to the senseless figure before them. How long the time seemed as they waited for medical help! What an eternity of horror were those anxious moments when the white, still face was locked in that rigid semblance of death, and neither pulse nor heart-beat gave any sign of returning life!

At last, however, the physician arrived—the little bare-footed Italian lad, who worked and ran errands for Maruccio, having

overtaken him at a short distance from the villa, and brought him back with all speed, as he had been ordered.

Very grave and anxious he looked as he helped to raise the young man and laid him on the couch while he tried to check the fearful hemorrhage slowly and surely draining the life-blood from his lungs.

"It is not the first time this has happened," he said at length to the old Italian lady—Vivienne having been dismissed from the room for ice and bandages. "But I fear one of the larger vessels in the lungs has burst. He is in great danger ; on no account must he be moved either. The least exertion or excitement will bring on a fresh attack of hemorrhage. There, see, he is opening his eyes. Don't speak, signor," he added earnestly, as Albert looked wonderingly up at the strange face bending over him—"Not a word—not a word, as you value your life !"

The young man closed his eyes with a faint sigh. He was too exhausted for any words ; he could not have moved or spoken, had he wished.

He lay there throughout the day, utterly spent, utterly wearied, and, ere night fell, the doctor declared in confidence that, though the immediate danger was passed—though the spark of life was not extinct yet—Albert Hoffmann's days were numbered ; he could not possibly live many months more."

Vivienne heard the fiat of science with a strange, sick horror. It seemed too dreadful to believe at first. She shuddered as she thought of the young gifted life, so pure, so fair, so sinless, yet condemned to death so early. All the promise of its genius, all the gifts of its intellect, condemned to the silence of the grave ere ever the world had recognized their beauty, or acknowledged their worth. The fragile life was stricken down with the bloom of its early promise still lingering in fresh, unsullied beauty on the scarce unclosed petals of existence, in the first fair radiance of its years. Without a thought that was impure, without a dream that was unholy, without one taint of dishonour, one breath of shame, one stain of wrong upon it, the life of the boy-artist was over for the world ere the world had learnt its value, or heard its teachings. All he had striven for so vainly, all he had sought so long, could never vex him again from the far-off heights of hopes never realized, of ambitions never attained. Perhaps in the exalted perfection of a better land he would complete the lessons begun in this.

Slowly and wearily the days drifted by, and slowly the spark of life wavered and burnt in the fragile form of the young artist. He remained at the Villa Constanza, nursed with tender and unremitting care by Vivienne and Madame Pitteri, as well as an experienced *Sœur de Charité* sent by Doctor Florio. It was only

after he was pronounced out of danger that he allowed Vivienne to write to Raoul and acquaint him with his illness. Unfortunately Raoul had left Paris ere the letter reached there, and only received it a month later. But the first announcement of Albert's illness decided him to return to Florence. He gave up his post as soon as arrangements could be made at the Embassy, urging important private affairs as his plea; and as he had never shirked duty however arduous, or missions however irksome, he obtained leave of absence readily, and was soon speeding back to Florence with a haste and swiftness that took no count of fatigue or thought of rest for himself.

Tumult and noise deafened him, change and speed wearied him; but throughout all, and above all, that one longing to be with his friend in the hour of his danger and weakness was ever in his heart. He thought of another journey on a like errand, and how he had come *too late*. Would it be so now? He groaned aloud as he thought of it; he prayed—oh how earnestly!—to be in time.

The days grew warmer; the spring was already at hand. He felt the sweep of southern breezes, and saw the blue of southern skies. The days grew hot and cloudless, the nights brilliant with starshine; but above all the beauty of the earth and the radiance of the heavens and the confused noise and constant motion of sound and tumult around him, he seemed to read that one great fear which had seized his heart when Vivienne's letter reached him—the fear of Albert's death.

When the lilies were blooming in the meadows around, when the air blew soft and fragrant over the young buds of the vines, when the delicious spring of Italy was at its fairest, when the bloom of violets and anemones filled every wood, and the glory of the sunlight touched the rippling waters, and lent a blush of warmth and colour to the budding flowers, he reached Florence at last. The bells were sounding for evening prayer, the reddened shadows of the roofs caught all the radiance of the heavens, and over the lily-whitened meadows came all the fragrance of the spring, and the last murmurs of the day's farewell.

The world has many cities, great, queenly, noble, but few, if any of them, can rival the loveliness of Florence. She holds no memories of terror, of evil, and of shame. The day-star of liberty has shone on her so long, and if her efforts at freedom have at times been blind, or ignorant, or fancy-led, they at least have been free from tyranny or slavish fear. The music and the poetry and the beauty of her past greatness thrill through her still, like a pulse that can never cease to beat, a song that can never cease to sound. Beauty has been with her always, is with her still, and, looking at her to-day, the memories of other years come back—noble, glorious, great. Men cannot forget even now

all she has suffered and achieved for the world in the past, to immortalize it in the present and the future.

Raoul welcomed the first sight of the fair city and its familiar beauty as he would have welcomed a friend. His journey was over at last. Then, and only then, he remembered he was quite ignorant of Albert's address. Vivienne had said in her hasty letter that he had been taken alarmingly ill at her villa, that his life was in danger, and the doctor in attendance expressed great doubts of his recovery.

But had Albert remained at the villa all this time, or been removed elsewhere?

This could only be decided by inquiring in person, and though Raoul de Verdreuil felt no inclination to intrude on Vivienne after what had passed between them on the last occasion, yet consideration for Albert's health, and his own anxiety respecting it, conquered his scruples, and, having left his luggage at the hotel where he had previously remained, he hastened to the Villa Constanza to make known his arrival.

He drove swiftly through the lighted streets, all gay and brilliant now with the mirthful, exuberant gaiety of an Italian crowd. But the mirth jarred on him, the music and the jests and the laughter were not in harmony with his own sad, anxious thoughts, and he longed to be free of them and out of sight and hearing.

"Oh, God! if I should lose him!" he cried wildly, remorsefully. "No one has ever loved me as he has done; and I have not half valued it, so long as there seemed no fear of losing him, so long as his presence was a certainty."

It is the burden of all human sorrow, this cry of *non-appreciation*. Never do we realize the blessing of the love lavished and spent on us till we lose it. Raoul de Verdreuil knew that now—now, when he could recall a thousand acts of boyish self-denial, of generous yielding, of faithful zeal, of unswerving fidelity, and knew that no other heart had loved him with so true a love, so unselfish a devotion, as this one friend who might soon be lost to him, whose love had been beyond "the love of women."

"The years take all from me," he thought wearily—"my loves, my hopes, my happiness—take all, and leave me but memories and grave-stones to mark the passage of Time. What have I done? what have I laboured for so long? Ere my dust has crumbled with its kindred clay, my name will be forgotten. The little good I have striven to achieve, the very deeds that made my name ring in men's ears and won praise all the more sweet because it was reluctant—all these will serve but a very small end, a very little purpose; and yet men labour on, toil on, strive on, though they know the best they may do is imperfect, and the greatest is forgotten."

The carriage stopped suddenly, and his train of thought came to an end. With a nervous dread, an apprehension altogether new to him, he dismissed the vehicle, and entered the villa grounds. His summons for admission was answered by Maruccia as before. He asked her if her mistress was in, and was answered in the affirmative. His next question was whether Albert Hoffmann still remained there.

"Oh, yes, signor," said the woman, "the doctor has forbidden him to be moved; he has never left us since his illness."

"And how is he?" asked Raoul eagerly, "any better?"

"Alas, no, *eccellenza*!" said the old woman sadly, wiping her eyes as she spoke. "He is fading just like the blossoms fade; he gets only weaker and weaker as the days pass by. It makes my heart ache to see him."

"Will you tell your mistress I wish to speak with her?" said Raoul huskily. The sight of the woman's emotion made him realize his friend's danger all too well.

Maruccio immediately led him into the sitting-room, and went to seek Vivienne.

Raoul stood there looking out into the gardens, though his eyes were too misty and dim with the great, sorrowful dread which made his heart ache so bitterly, to see them. The rustle of a woman's dress, the sound of a light step, made him look hastily round. Then he saw Vivienne again—not the beautiful, scornful woman who had parted from him without a word, whose coldness had well-nigh broken his heart—but pale, weary, languid with signs of suffering and of trouble in her fair, sweet face, and a world of sorrow in her eyes. She came forward to greet him very quietly.

"I am glad you have come," she said gently; "it has been a sad and anxious time. You will find him fearfully changed, I fear!"

"May I see him?" asked Raoul eagerly, his thoughts, like her own, forgetful of the past estrangement in this moment of suffering.

"Certainly; he is asleep just now, but if you like to sit by him or be with him you are quite welcome to do so. He asks for you every day, every hour almost. Doctor Florio says always your presence may be beneficial to him, even now."

"I came as soon as I could. I have travelled night and day since I first heard of his illness," said Raoul, as he followed her from the room.

Vivienne did not answer. She paused before a door at the end of the passage, softly turned the handle, and, glancing round, made a sign for Raoul to enter; then she closed the door and left him alone with his dying friend.

Albert was asleep. Treading softly and cautiously over the carpeted floor, Raoul came and stood beside his couch, scarcely daring to breathe for fear of disturbing the death-like slumber in which he lay.

As he looked at him he could have wept like a woman, so changed, so worn, so fragile was the slender form ; so thin and transparent the white, folded hands, the pale, still face. And he looked so fair, so boyish still, with the long, silken lashes resting on his cheek, the rich, golden curls shading the delicate brow.

But a strange, pathetic beauty had shadowed and spiritualized every feature—the beauty of heaven, the shadow of death. Looking at him as he lay there, Raoul thought it might have been an angel's face on which he gazed : so fair, so pure, so totally unlike anything of earth did it seem. One could never fancy such a face being old, or careworn, or haggard ; it bore only the dreams of youth, the purest imaginings of genius, and the stamp of heaven sealed its dreamless rest, and hushed the cares of earth at last on the breast of eternal peace.

"He was not fit for such a world as this," thought Raoul, as he gazed. "No wonder its doubts, its follies, its blind unbelief in all things great and pure, were too much for him to contend with ! If to lose him is hard, to keep him seems so cruel ! Perhaps the music of his soul will find kindred echoes in another sphere. God grant it !"

He kept his watch by the sleeper for long. The shadows deepened, the stars shone in through the casements as if they, too, loved to look at that fair, sweet face, with its delicate, pathetic beauty, and the calm of that perfect peace upon it. And they kept watch with him—as though they were angel's eyes, as though that watch might end in a welcome, glad and sweet—a welcome for the pure young soul whose noon of life would soon deepen into the glad, full light of God's eternal day.

Raoul could not buoy himself up with false hopes or fictitious fancies, though his heart ached when he thought of the coming parting with his only friend, and he knew that in all the world none other would be so dear and true a one as Albert Hoffmann. While these thoughts filled his heart, and his eyes wandered away to the dreamy, cloudless calm of the starry heavens without, Albert suddenly stirred—moved—awoke. Very faint and low came his voice to Raoul's ear ; in the dusky light he could not see his face.

"Raoul ! dear Raoul ! I know that is you ; you have come to me at last !"

CHAPTER II.

THE LAST DREAM.

"A longing fills my heart,
Oh, how I fain would fly
And seek eternal rest
In that far home on high!"—*Rückert.*

It almost seemed as if Raoul's presence had given Albert a new lease of life, for from the hour when he awoke from his long slumber and saw his friend beside him, he began slowly to mend. The days lengthened into weeks, and care and attention and devoted nursing won back some frail remnants of strength to the fragile form, and at last he was able to leave his couch and feel the sweet, soft air of heaven fan his brow, and see the rich verdure, the blossoming orchards, the lily-whitened meadows, and the silver gleam of the Arno once more.

It was April—the month whose praises poets have hymned, April, that fairest time of the fair young year—when he was at last able to drive out with Raoul beside him. The land was a garden of beauty. The sunlight, warm and golden, lent its colour to the wild flowers, and kissed the rippling waters, and shone in the hearts of the arum-lilies, on the crimson anemones and purple wood-violets. The lulling sound of waters, the gliding noise of a bird's flight, the hum of bees rifling sweets from the wild roses, the tender green of the blossoming vines, the blue sweep of the stretching heavens—all these had a new and fairer beauty for the young artist now, and his eyes rested on their loveliness with the musing gaze of a poet—with the rapt worship of an artist's nature.

He was very happy, happier than he had ever thought to be on earth again, for the fever and the pain of his wasted love was softened now, and he knew—ah, only too well—that his little space of life would soon be over, that ere another summer had come and gone the grass would be green above his lonely resting-place, the winds sighing his requiem among the beechen shadows of the hill-side.

One great joy had been granted him; the one dream of his life would be realized at last. The opera on which he had set such store was to be produced in a few weeks' time; Vivienne had determined upon it, and, what with persuasion and the influence of her new position, had gained the point. It had been in progress of preparation for some time, and in three weeks the first performance would be given.

Vivienne had acted upon Raoul's advice. She had appointed Carlo Viotti as her agent and steward, and he took all trouble

off her hands, and managed her business-affairs so thoroughly and conscientiously that Vivienne felt deeply grateful for his assistance. She was perfectly firm in her determination not to leave Florence until the opera season was over; indeed, she shrank from going back to Renonçeux with a repugnance and aversion she could not conceal, and at which Viotti marvelled excessively. He was now at Renonçeux, arranging matters for her, superintending the estates, interviewing the lawyers, and keeping her all the time well informed of the progress of affairs. Viotti would rather have occupied his old post of secretary to Raoul de Verdreuil—would infinitely have preferred to be near him, and of assistance and service to him as heretofore, but Raoul had so earnestly desired him to manage for Vivienne—had so represented it as a personal favour, that he put his own wishes aside, and gave to the young heiress all the devotion, attention, and zealous help that he would have given to Raoul himself.

Vivienne wondered sometimes at the deep interest he took in her and everything connected with her, for he gave her the assistance of a devoted friend more than the paid services of an ordinary agent. She knew he was faithfully attached to Raoul, though Viotti's lips were sealed as to the debt of gratitude he owed his benefactor, and the strange mystery and full dishonour of Blanche de Verdreuil's life had never been told to her. Raoul had bound both Albert and Viotti by a promise never to reveal the secret of the woman who had passed as his father's wife so long, never to breathe to Vivienne the shame and the horror of that past, whose infamy would have shocked her pure heart beyond all words.

She knew nothing, therefore, of Carlo Viotti's connexion with the dead woman, or of the links which bound him in that mysterious chain of circumstances to Raoul. She only thought that his affection and devotion were the fruits of some generous relief, some timely aid granted in the past by the man he loved so faithfully. Between Raoul and herself there existed now a coldness and restraint which lay like a gulf between them. He was studiously courteous, unfailingly gentle; but the calm, cold politeness of his manner was a barrier she could not break down. He never spoke to her unless obliged; he neither advised, nor directed, nor questioned her proceedings. In his visits to his friend, the very fact of her entrance or presence would check the tide of speech on his lips and make him silent, constrained, indifferent. Vivienne saw the change, and her heart ached at it. She knew she had only herself to blame; she told herself again and again that her scorn had killed all Raoul's love—that her doubts and suspicions had angered him beyond forgiveness—that never again would she hear him plead for her trust, and pray for her love as he had done once.

And his coldness was torture now. She could not explain what

he appeared to have forgotten : she could not plead for what he never seemed to seek. She also could only suffer silently, proudly, making no sign, betraying no pain, but feeling that she would give all the world could she break down that chilling reserve, and win one smile from the grave, proud lips—one look of softer feeling from the eyes that only looked with tenderness on Albert Hoffmann's face.

But Raoul was not changed ; in his heart the same wild passion throbbed ; in his veins the same hot, rapturous joy ran swift and fierce with every sight of her face, every sound of her voice. But he would not betray it again. He would not have her say such words as had almost maddened him by their scorn and disbelief when first he told her of his love.

At times his task was hard, but to Raoul the lesson of endurance and self-restraint was nothing new. When he looked at the delicate loveliness of her face, the dreamy, lustrous, passionate eyes, he longed with all a man's mad longing to win her for himself, to hold her to his heart, to feast his eyes, his lips, his senses in that intoxication of joy which could only come with the love of this one woman who was all the world to him. Yet he made no sign ; he stifled every word, every look that could have betrayed such longings ; beneath the icy exterior of his manner to her there gleamed no warmth or glow from the lava fires of his heart. The passion, that at times would have broken forth in hot, unconsidered words, he crushed back from his lips. A chain lay upon his love which only she could break, so long as she kept silence, so long he held it back.

The brilliance of her beauty, the light of her smile, the infinite tenderness of her manner to Albert—all these were torture to him now. Only the stoniest self-command, only the very coldest courtesy dared he permit himself to show ; and it was little wonder if Vivienne at last believed the semblance to be reality, the coldness unfeigned. Raoul de Verdreuil had never permitted himself to be the slave of his passions, even in his youth ; and now, though the task was harder than any previous one, he yet placed a curb upon them as stern, as inflexible, as any of the mailed knights of old, and only in solitude did he dwell on his own madness, did he linger on the memory of that sweet enchantment, or the impassioned fancies of his visions of love. He told himself that love was doomed to be his curse—that since he had yielded the long-kept mastery of his life to a woman's power, he would never know peace or content again ; but all the telling could not bring him back his freedom, could not restore the old calmness to his heart, the old indifference to his life. "It is too late now," he would say half unconsciously, "too late for reason ; come what may, I shall love her till my death."

Ah ! there is no love so hard to conquer as the love we fight

against with every effort of our will—the love we crave and covet, while all the time we tell our hearts it is not for us, it can never, never be ours. Passion blessed with fruition becomes soon valueless, but the love that has known no hope for its yearning, no solace for its pain, no satiety for its wild desires, is, of all others, the love that burns and throbs in heart and pulse with every breath of life—is the only love unconquerable by will, and unconquered by death.

* * * * *

It was the night before that fixed for the performance of Albert Hoffman's opera. The rehearsals had been constant, the preparations were complete ; the only regret the young composer had was that he himself was unable to conduct it. That was quite impossible now.

His beloved score had to be entrusted to a stranger's care, and produced under a stranger's supervision ; but still he was determined to be present on the opening night, and, though Doctor Florio shook his head and looked grave at the proposition, and Raoul strove tenderly to dissuade him, he was firm in his resolve.

"It is only a question of time, Raoul," he said, in answer to his friend's remonstrances, "only a question of time for my health to last now ; I know that full well, and this may be the last pleasure I can have on earth. You surely do not wish to deprive me of it ?"

And Raoul, turning sadly away from the wistful face and pleading eyes, had no heart to say more. So it came to pass that Albert had his way, and was content.

On the night previous to the performance he was sitting by Raoul's side at the open window of the room Vivienne had given up to him. She had just left them, and passed out into the grounds, and they could see her walking slowly up and down the terrace below—the shimmer of the moonbeams resting on the dusky softness of her hair, the white folds of her trailing dress.

They were both silent as they watched her ; for to both her presence had an intoxication, a delight sweet and sad with its nameless pain and its silent hopelessness. It was a hot, windless night. The stars were shining in myriads above the cypress-woods ; the heavy odours of the roses scented all the air ; the silvery gleam and showering spray of a fountain sparkled between a screen of leaves ; the far-off sweetness of a nightingale's song rose and fell on the silence.

"Raoul," said Albert very softly, so that his voice chimed in with the dreamy silence around them,—*"Raoul, you are not happy. I wish you would unburden your heart to me to-night ; for indeed I believe I can heal some of its pain. I may not be here with you much longer. While I am, I should like to feel I have done some good."*

"Good ! Oh, Albert ! your life has been nothing but good

What have you to reproach yourself with? I wish I could say as much for my own!"

"In all our lives there is some sin," said Albert gently. "Mine is not exempt. I have had fewer temptations than most men, because of my disinclination to mix with the world as they do, and because in Art I have found purer joy than in any other thing in life save *one*. But that was a dream—it is all over now for ever—and, Raoul, it is of this I wish to speak to you. Vivienne loves you. Do you not believe it? It is true—quite true. I tell you with my dying breath, for I know my hours are numbered, and I want—oh, how I want you to be happy ere I leave you, Raoul! Vivienne is very proud, and you are very proud, and you are both heaping up endless misery for yourselves because neither of you will speak, or show the other the secret of your apparent coldness. I have loved Vivienne ever since I first saw her—ever since she stood in the music-gallery at Renonçeux, and listened and spoke to me. I have loved her—yes—but she never cared for me more than a sister cares for a brother, or a friend for a friend. Somehow, since I loved her, even my music has not been the same; there is always something missing, something wanting. It is like searching for a lost note to make one harmony complete, and I shall never find it here, Raoul—never on earth, I know."

He paused, and his eyes wandered to the ilex-woods and cypress-groves beyond, over to where the stars glittered in the radiant heavens, and the moon hung like a silver lamp in her vault of cloudless blue.

"How beautiful earth is!" he said dreamily. "Ah! even death has no terrors in Italy. It is like a dream of rest when we are weary—and I am very weary, Raoul. I have been weary so long—so long—although my years are few, and my life is young, and one would think it hard for me to die. But *they* will not die with me—my works, my labours, my thoughts—they will be remembered at last, and my name will live after me; that is happiness enough!"

"To-morrow will decide: after that I have no fear. If I am worth remembering, men will believe it *then*."

His hopes, his thoughts, his ambitions—all centred in this work, this one utterance of his genius which was to make or mar his fame—to force the world to believe in him at last. Of failure he never dreamed; of success he never doubted; and he lay back now on his cushions with a light of rapture and of hope in his eyes that almost startled Raoul as he watched him.

Presently he spoke again.

"When I am gone, Raoul, you will know I was right when I said Vivienne loves you—only you. I do not think she has ever given a thought to another man; she made a hero of you ere ever

she saw you, when I used to tell her how good and great and noble you were. If you will but lay aside your pride, and speak to her once more, you will find she has long ago repented that cruel rejection which arose partly from a woman's jealousy, partly from a woman's pride and want of faith. I will not tell you more, for I want you to learn the truth from her own lips; the happiness will be so much the greater for you both. I shall know of your happiness, perhaps, and rejoice in it too, though I have done with the things of earth for ever."

"Albert," said Raoul hoarsely, "your words are like new life to me; but—to gain my joy at the expense of yours—it is the one drop of bitterness in my cup!"

"But you must not think I envy you," said Albert. "If I were to live on for long years yet, I should still rejoice that the two friends I love best are happy and content at last; and I should still have one great comfort left—for music was in my soul always, and it never has died out of it, nor would die for any sufferings, any privations I might have had to bear. Do you remember, Raoul, how you used to laugh at me once, and call me a dreamer and an idler, and declare I was not fit to do anything in the world? Perhaps you were right; the battle was soon over. It seemed to take all the spirit and the strength out of me, and I have grown weary of it all now."

"Don't speak so," cried Raoul hoarsely. "Your words seem like a reproach to me. I might have helped you, I might have made things easier for you. I might have smoothed the rough places you have had to tread. I ought never to have left you to fight the battle of life unaided and alone."

Albert looked up the troubled face, his own eyes full of love and tenderness unutterable.

"You must not say or think that, Raoul," he answered gently. "You have nothing to reproach yourself with; never had man a friend more true, a love more loyal than yours. Believe me, it is better as it is, better I should die now, than live on through years of pain and weakness, for I can never be strong again. And when one is weak and useless, always dreaming of things that can never be—always weary and tired as I have been of late—surely the rest that comes with eternal peace is the best gift God can bestow."

And Raoul, looking at the white face, the listless hands, the blue-veined lids drooping so wearily over the beautiful, boyish eyes, felt that he was right. Earth was indeed no fit place for him.

He bent towards him in the dusky gloom, while the moonlight fell with a glory of its own on the face he loved so well. He could not speak; his heart was full of a terrible, speechless grief, but he bent his lips on the white brow, so pure, shadowless, so calm—and that mute caress told all he felt.

CHAPTER III.

ERE THE END COMES.

“A tale of high and passionate thoughts
To their own music chanted.”

THE mellow heat of noon, warm with summer's near approach, fragrant with all the odours of the spring, rested on Florence, bathing her dusky palaces in glowing colour, gleaming like gold on the Arno's winding waters. The soft south wind stirred the cypress-boughs and blew the rosy clouds of oleander-leaves across Albert Hoffmann's face as he lay on a pile of shawls and cushions in the garden of the Villa Constanza. He was listening to Vivienne's voice as through the open windows beyond he heard her singing her favourite arias in his opera of "*Kunigunde*." The last rehearsal had taken place, but she was still practising her part, determined, as Albert laughingly told her, on "perfecting perfection."

Albert was expecting Raoul to come, and was awaiting him in the garden, where he usually spent his afternoons now. He loved to see the sunlight resting on the city through the veil of olive-leaves beyond the walls, and to hear the birds' songs breaking the stillness, and watch the cool shadows sleeping under the ilex-leaves. On this day he had been restless, uneasy, disturbed, wholly unable to settle down into anything like quiet; and Vivienne had softly chided him for his restlessness, and declared that, unless he would try and compose himself a little, he would be quite unfit to go to the opera-house that evening.

She had been glad when he at last went out into the gardens, and, having seen him comfortably settled there, screened from the heat and protected from the sun, she left him, to have one more private rehearsal, she laughingly told him—but in reality because she wished to avoid Raoul, and she knew he would soon be there. He was to spend the afternoon—dine with them, and accompany them afterwards to the opera.

Albert felt his restlessness vanish, and insensibly grew calmer as he lay there, lulled by the dreamy warmth of the air, the heavy fragrance of the orange-blossoms, the thrilling magic of the exquisite voice that alone broke the stillness with its passionate waves of melody—its mournful, pathetic meaning. It echoed over the silence of the deserted gardens, eloquent as any Pasta's, it bore to him the fuller meaning of his own labours, it interpreted the idealic loveliness of his own thoughts.

Albert had searched the classic lore and innumerable traditions of his fatherland for a subject for his opera; and the story of the

suspected wife, whose innocence heaven itself had determined to prove by a miracle, was the one he had chosen at last. It gave best scope for dramatic force—for realistic and poetic imagery. He had poured out in its conception and incarnation all the passion and fervour of his soul, all the joy and hope that were dead in his own life.

If he was ignorant of most of the ways of men, if his heart still kept the innocence and simplicity of his boyhood, in his art he brought all the vivid force of imagination to atone for it; and out of all the pure, soul-fed fancies of his nature sprang poems of exquisite beauty—music of grandest power—loveliness sublime, ethereal, inspired, that was destined yet to haunt the world with its pure teachings, and stir it to wonder and delight by its genius.

"*Kunigunde*" was a poem in itself. His matured knowledge, his untiring zeal, had all been spent upon it. By it his fame would be decided; through its success his name would live; and the wealth and thought and labour spent in its creation be pronounced worthy of all success—deserving of the triumph he sought.

While these thoughts flushed his face and brightened his eyes, and stirred his heart with that alternation of hope and fear which is inseparable from all dreams of fame the nearer their realization approaches, he heard Raoul's step advancing at last. He raised himself hastily from his languid attitude, the hectic colour deepening, the blue, dreamy eyes flashing a welcome warm and tender as a woman's, on the face he loved so dearly.

"At last you have come! The time has seemed so long without you, Raoul," he said eagerly. "You are later than usual, are you not?"

"Yes, I was detained by Viotti. He has come from Paris. He wanted to see Vivienne, but I told him not to trouble her with business matters to-day; she will want all her attention for the great event of the evening."

"I don't think she is at all nervous respecting her part," said Albert; "and I tell her she is perfect in the music. Of course I cannot judge of the acting, as I have not been present at any rehearsal; but I have no fear of her success. It is not every composer who is fortunate enough to obtain a *prima donna* so gifted, and yet so humble, so amenable to all his hints and instructions as Vivienne has been to mine."

"You must not dwell too much upon it though," said Raoul, as he threw himself down beside his friend on the tangled grasses, all starred with showers of fallen blossoms from the wind-stirred boughs above. "What an exquisite day this is! You have chosen the fairest spot for your retreat, I think, in all the gardens."

"Vivienne chose it," answered Albert; "she scolded me for being so restless and dissatisfied all day, and finally brought me

out here to see if that would have a better effect on my nerves. I think she was wise, don't you?"

"You look too excited to please me," said Raoul, as he laid his hand lightly on the burning, wasted hands of the young artist. "You won't be fit to go out to-night if you do not try and gain a little more composure."

"Oh! I shall be all right by that time," answered Albert, with a laugh that somehow sounded forced and unnatural to Raoul's ears.

He did not like Albert's looks, his feverish pulse, his flushed face, and the painfully brilliant light in his eyes. He strove to calm down his excitement. He led him to speak of other things, of other days, and then he took out a book—a work whose power and force had already made men talk of its author in wonder, and give his name rich guerdon of praise, while they quoted and admired it for truths almost too noble and exalted to seem attainable on earth.

The book was his own, and the secret of its authorship was known only to Albert. As Raoul read out chapter after chapter, his rich, musical voice giving new power and infinite charm to the words, Albert insensibly yielded to the reaction of the day's excitement, to the lulling peace of the hour, the soothing calm of the voice beside him. His eyes closed, the fever-flush died out of his face, and the profound repose of the slumber he needed, stole softly over his wearied brain. Scarcely daring to move for fear of disturbing him, Raoul closed the book and sat silently watching the sleeper. He looked more fragile, more delicate than ever, as he lay in the hushed calm of that trance-like slumber, the green tracery of the leaves falling shadow-like across his brow; the bars of the slanting sunlight mingling with the gold of his hair.

As Raoul watched him he felt a light touch on his shoulder, and, glancing hastily up, he saw Vivienne standing there. He had not heard her come, so soft had been her step on the velvet sward behind him. She handed him a light, fleecy-looking shawl of some fine wool, and whispered him to wrap it round Albert.

"I do not like his sleeping in the open air," she said softly, "but it seems a pity to disturb him—rest is so essential now."

Raoul covered the prostrate figure as gently and carefully as a woman, and then, rising to his feet, he walked by Vivienne's side up and down the mossy lawn beyond, just within sight and hearing of the sleeper, should he waken.

It was both unusual and strange for him to seek her, even for a moment, and the girl wondered at his doing so now. They were silent for some moments, though the subtle charm of each other's presence had a power and an eloquence that needed no

speech. A new, strange shyness oppressed Vivienne, and gave her face a flush of softened feeling, of half-proud, half-shy grace, lovelier than any of the brilliance and brightness that sometimes rested on it.

As Raoul spoke, the shyness deepened, the grave, gentle look he remembered so well replaced the ordinary proud indifference of her face, and almost insensibly the change acted on his own heart like a spell. His voice had a richer melody, and in his eyes the light of passion, intense and uncontrollable, burned and glowed once more. He thought of Albert's words. Could it, indeed, be possible that she loved him? The thought seemed wild, vain, incredible for very joy and sweetness of its folly. He would wait and watch still, ere risking all his happiness again on the presumptuous madness of a love he could not conquer.

He walked on beside her mechanically, as one in a dream, his senses steeped in the languor and intoxication of her presence too utterly for him to do more than wonder at his weakness, and succumb irresistibly to it.

Now and then the flash of a giddy, exultant rapture ran swiftly through his veins. He scarcely dared ask himself why he hoped once more—only it seemed to him that the coldness and indifference had all vanished from her manner to-day—that the proud, soft eyes were shy and tender with the tenderness of a woman's love, and the regret of a woman's pity.

They talked of nothing personal; but the very care with which they avoided it showed plainly enough it was from fear of some secret and hidden danger lurking beneath such a subject. Had they been really indifferent to each other, such avoidance would have been unnecessary.

The afternoon wore slowly away, the shadows lengthened, the daylight faded in the west, and they stood and watched the sunset splendour of the heavens reddening the marble spires of the distant city, flashing in light and glory over the rippling waters of the Arno.

"How beautiful Florence is!" said Vivienne softly; "there is no other city I love so well or I think so fair."

"I can well believe it," he answered. "She has a charm that entrances all hearts—a spell that binds young and old. Hark! how the bells sound now! It is the vesper hour already."

"I like those calls to prayer," she said musingly; "the *Matin* bell, the *Ave Maria*, the *Vespers*. They seem to suit the land, the scenes, the hours in Italy so well."

"But they have a sad meaning too," answered Raoul; "they speak of superstition—of creeds men have deified and God has disregarded—of the errors of priesthood, the weary rituals, the endless forms that are devoid of all heart-worship, that are only

men's means for their own ends, and yet which they pretend are God's commands and God's teaching."

"How ignorant we are at best of what is really true and right!" she said sadly. "Men's creeds are so numerous, so perplexing. It is one endless struggle in groping for light in the midst of surrounding darkness."

"And the light is only *there*," he said reverently, as his eyes rested on the golden bars of the setting sun, and the crimson glory of the western heavens. "Nature's God is the only God whose wisdom defies all change of time and creeds. We learn greater truths on the mountain-heights, the desert sands, the forest depths, than ever we learn in stuccoed churches, at painted altars, at shrines of gold and marble, at the confessionals of priests no wiser, no better, no nearer heaven than the poor penitents they blind and keep in ignorance for their own purposes."

"You are right, I think," she answered softly; "there is no temple so fair, so great, as *that*—no teaching so pure, so grand, yet withal so simple, as the teaching we learn from thence."

He looked on her with that new-born glow of passion in his eyes, made nobler now by the thoughts she had awakened. As he watched her face, his heart grew at peace within him—lulled to rest by the spell of her presence—hopeful with the greatness of a love that he had deemed impossible till Albert's words had once again given it life and faith and gladness.

She seemed to have forgotten him for a moment; her eyes were fixed on the opal tints of the sky, and her thoughts had wandered far away to some impossible wonder-land of her own, where he could not follow her. She looked round at last with a faint sigh, and a hot flush rose to her face as she met his eyes fixed so earnestly on her.

"I must go," she said hurriedly, "and I think we ought to wake Albert now. He should not sleep in the open air after sunset."

So they turned back, and while Vivienne went into the house to dress for dinner, Raoul woke Albert and helped him indoors again.

"I feel so much better and stronger, Raoul," said the young artist eagerly; "I think my long sleep has done me good."

And Raoul smiled tenderly at the flushed, eager face, and agreed that he did look better—much better. And neither of them remembered the change which always seems for the better—ere the end comes.

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"Albert," said Vivienne anxiously, as the hour at last arrived when she must depart for the opera, "promise me that you will sit quietly in your box and be as careful of yourself as possible. You are not to show yourself unless absolutely

necessary. Doctor Florio, *do* make him take care!" she added entreatingly, as the old physician approached them. "I shall never be able to act or sing if I am tortured with anxiety about your patient. I think it is very unwise of him to go to-night."

Albert smiled brightly at the beautiful pleading face above him.

"Have no fear, Vivienne," he said gaily, "I will be a model of propriety and caution. As for not going, I should be in a raging fever with anxiety and suspense if I remained at home."

"I had no idea you were so wilful," she said as she turned away. "Now I must not wait another moment or I shall be late."

Raoul took her to her carriage, and Doctor Florio followed them with Madame Pitteri.

"You are not afraid of your own powers, Vivienne," he whispered softly, as he stood beside her in the soft, clear light of the new-risen moon, waiting for her companion to join them.

She glanced quickly up,—

"No not for myself, I only think of *him*."

And the words brought no pang of jealousy to Raoul's heart now

CHAPTER IV

FAME—A T L A S T.

"He heeded not reviling tones,
Nor sold his heart to idle moans,
But, looking upward, full of grace,
He pray'd, and from that happy place
God's glory smote him on the face."

A GLOW of light and colour—a confused sense of gilding and hangings and laces—a vision of beautiful faces, of graceful, languid forms, mingling with the faint, sweet odours of flowers from rare bouquets, of soft voices and rippling laughter rising and falling on the air with the sweet, chiming, bell-like music of Italian mirth—this was the first idea the opera-house of Florence conveyed to Albert Hoffman as he glanced through the curtains of his box after his arrival.

The house was crowded in every part. The advent of a new opera by a new composer was an irresistible temptation, even if Vivienne's fame and popularity had not been as great as they were.

The first notes of the overture sounded as Albert and Raoul seated themselves in the box, and a breathless silence stilled the laughter and the jests of the audience. The sweet,

thrilling notes, with their powers of sound, their pathetic echoes of sadness, their passionate, soul-thrilling beauty, stilled the vast assemblage like a spell.

The waves of melody gathered force and volume every moment ; the rich cadences rose and fell and died away, to come back clothed in new forms, varied by skilful changes ; and finally, with a thunder of full and concentrated power that vibrated through the building and throbbed like the waves of a mighty sea, the music ceased, the overture was ended.

A momentary silence—then, as if by one accord, a torrent of applause ensued. The enthusiasm of the listeners rose to such a pitch that nothing but the rising of the curtain silenced them, and that alone prevented the encore which the conductor had almost been forced to grant.

The opera commenced amidst breathless attention, intense silence, eager enthusiasm, which only gathered force and fervour with every act.

What music it was ! Fresh, graceful, æriel ; sad with pathos, passionate with feeling, melancholy as the old weird romances of a buried age, exquisitely tender as the dreams of love when it is young. It was music that could charm the coldest heart, that bore the eloquence of teachings pure and noble as they were gifted and sublime—music whose tender and abiding strains lingered on the ear and haunted the memory, as the faint, sweet sadness of some departing dream haunts our first awaking.

Did it tell, to those who listened, the tale of a life's despair ? Did it speak of dying hopes, of passionate longings, and dreams so pure and great that earth could never satisfy them ? Did it speak of the aching heart and weary brain whose whole powers had been spent in that creation ? Could it tell of that far-off time when a little tender lad had dreamed his days away in music, seeing beauty and fragrance and delight in every smile of the sunshine, in every change of the seasons, whose brain could never rest without weaving every fancy into sound, every thought into melody ?

It bore the impress of all these things to the boy-artist as he listened to it now. It recalled to him the old, fair, dead days when his heart woke from the sleep of youth and spent its pure and perfect passion on a love that had died in hopelessness. It told him in its sadness and despair of all he had striven to teach the world, all that it had been too deaf to hear, too blind to see, too heartless to care about, while yet that care might have satisfied his heart, and saved his life.

He leaned back on his seat and listened, feeling that new, strange pleasure which every author's heart feels when he sees the world is stirred and roused and interested by the creations

of his own brain—when for the first time his power is acknowledged and his genius crowned by the homage of his fellow men.

Vivienne was unquestionably the attraction which had drawn many to the opera-house that night; but Vivienne, beautiful, gifted, perfect as she was, soon became only a part of the representation. Every ear was charmed, every heart touched by the spell of the music itself; its passion appealed to the heart, its loveliness haunted the memory, it was famous for all time from this night forward.

With the close of the fourth and last act the enthusiasm of the audience knew no bounds. The rapturous outburst of applause filling the whole house, echoed again and again through the vast building. As the plaudits reached the ears of the young composer, as his name passed from one to another in the unanimous call for his appearance, he turned his eyes away from the stage, and looked at Raoul with the strange, far-off gaze of a man in a dream.

“Is it—over?” he asked.

“Yes!” said Raoul, looking anxiously at him. “You had better show yourself just once, Albert; then you must come home.”

Louder and more impatient grew the demand of the waiting crowd; then Albert, suddenly waking to what was required of him, swept aside the curtains of the box and gazed at the sea of eager faces below, above, around him. The whole vast arena of the theatre echoed and re-echoed with his name, and as his face at last appeared, and his grave bow at last acknowledged the outburst of homage, the tumult was redoubled. With one common impulse the people rose, their shouts and acclamations rushing as from one man, one heart, to greet him. The fair, boyish face flushed with pleasure, the beautiful, dreamy eyes swept over the faces of the gazing crowd with still that strange, far-off look in their depths as though they saw nothing. Then a strange noise as of rushing waters filled his ears. He knew what that sound foreboded. He staggered back from the place where he stood, and the crowd around waited—stilled, awe-struck, breathless. An awe oppressed and overwhelmed them. The look of that white, boyish face haunted them with a strange dread. But the curtains fell before the box once more, the orchestra separated, the lights were being extinguished, and they poured out from the different entrances of the theatre with the music they had heard on their lips and in their hearts. But in the stage box was confusion, terror, dismay, for Albert Hoffmann, as he staggered back in the dizzy, awful faintness of that moment, had fallen into Raoul's outstretched arms with the life-blood flowing from his lips and crimsoning the floor with its terrible stains.

So his name was given at last to the fame he sought.

The villa was reached at last, and they bore him to his own room, and laid him down on the couch he would never leave in life again. He was not dead yet, though they had feared it in that terrible moment when his eyes had closed and his senses given way before the strain on his fragile strength and weakened frame. Not dead—for when Vivienne, white with terror, faint with fear, came swiftly to the room where they had laid him, her cry of agony reached him as it thrilled through the silence of the night, and he opened his eyes at last.

The girl threw herself beside him with a sudden, passionate abandonment of grief wholly unlike her usual self-restraint.

"Oh, Albert ! Albert !" she cried, while her tears fell like rain on his hands as she bent her head upon them. "You are not going to leave us *now*—now, when your genius has won a triumph so great—when the world owns your power and acknowledges your worth at last ?"

Her touch, her voice, gave back for one fleeting moment a pang of life and strength to the almost pulseless heart, a flush and glow of warmth to the white, still face. He turned his eyes to hers ; the faithful passion of his long unswerving devotion, lingered there still, despite the languor of weakness, the near approach of death.

"My one love !" he murmured, so faintly that only her ears could hear it. "Even my triumph to-night is more precious for your sake than for its own. You won it for me, Vivienne !"

She was silent. Save for her sobs the room was still as death. Raoul's eyes lingered on the face of his dying friend with speechless tenderness, with unutterable regret.

"Albert," he whispered, as he bent over him, "if my neglect or forgetfulness have in any way brought this upon you, oh, forgive me now ! Indeed, indeed, my remorse is deeper than you think."

"You have never done anything for which I blame you, Raoul," said Albert gently. "You have been to me the noblest, truest friend that ever man was blest with—more I cannot say. I have nothing to forgive you—nothing. You will remember me in your hours of happiness, Raoul, when the treasure I coveted is safely in your keeping, *That* is all I ask of you. Vivienne," he continued, "Vivienne, are you there still ? I cannot see you now, my beautiful darling ; but you will not forget me, I know."

"Never—never !" she sobbed. "Oh, Albert, if you could have been with us only a little longer !"

"It is God's will," he said reverently. "Vivienne, let your lips touch mine once only ere I die ; *he* will not envy me that, I know."

The girl raised her head and stooped over him without a word. Kiss more pure, more passionless, never rested on the lips of man. His eyes looked on her with that perfect love which in all his life had been so entirely her own, and with that last caress his last breath fled.

* * * *

Albert Hoffmann has been buried to-day

All Florence mourns him with a sad and tender regret. All have striven to do him honour. His own Mass has been sung in the great cathedral, his own Requiem chanted as his funeral service. His name is on every lip, his music on every tongue. His gifted powers, his marvellous genius, his early death have brought him fame at last.

Ah ! the world has a strange fancy of its own for immortalizing genius. It kills it by neglect, and then—believes in it.

Yes, Florence mourns to-day, and bells peal out slow and sad the tale of another life departed, and vast multitudes throng the great Duomo to listen to the Mass the boy-artist wrote in years gone by when the world would have none of him. And as the deep, rich notes of the organ, and the clear young voices of the choristers give forth the grandeur of his music, the beauty of his thoughts, men wonder and women weep, and all praise the genius they have lost for ever, and adore it with a mad, impulsive worship born of regret, and sorrow that it has faded from their midst so early. But the recognition comes too late !

Too late !

Are any words so sad as these with which to immortalize greatness ? Is any satire so severe upon our tardy praises, our blind, unreasoning neglect ? Let those answer who deem that marble and gold, and praise and worship, can atone to the dead for what has been denied to the living—who kill all joy and hope and sweetness of life, and then suddenly wake to the knowledge of its worth, and the remorse of their long blindness.

The bells are waiting for the dead to-day.

So let them wail, so let them ring. They will never teach these truths to the living.

* * * *

It is evening.

The glow of roses burns in the dusky shadows ; the glow-worms light the white radiance of the magnolia-blossoms ; all the hill-side is hushed and still, and on the shelving slopes of leaf and blossom the fire-flies sparkle and rest till they look star-studded as the skies. From the city below, the faint sound of voices, the low, sweet chime of bells, float soft and faint on the wings of the breeze. The moonlight sleeps on the waters, the stars gleam in the dark, deep blue of the heavens like lamps which the angels have lighted. The perfect beauty of the perfect

night enfolds the earth with the calm of its breathless peace, as though sorrow had never saddened, and sin had never desecrated it.

Two figures stand among the shadows of the ilex-wood, and gaze down at the massed lights of the city far below.

In the sweet, luminous night, while the moonbeams rest on the face of the woman he loves, Raoul de Verdreuil's eyes speak their tale of love again. In the hushed calmness, the dreamy silence and sweetness of the hour, their hearts speak out their long-guarded secret; their pulses throb with swift, uncertain beats. In the ecstasy of such an hour, all the purest, richest joy of life seems concentrated. For a few brief moments they forget the friend they have lost, the life they have mourned, with that supreme egotism of passion which holds all other things of no account beside itself, and the love it craves.

"Vivienne," said Raoul, "am I right in thinking we both erred in the past? Will you believe me *now*, if I tell you no pride, no coldness, no neglect has killed my love for you? Can you trust me—yet?"

Her head bent in its haughty royalty, abashed by the memory of that one great error—feeling unworthy of the joy that would crown it evermore.

"Oh, forgive me!" she cried, while all the remorse of her heart could not dim the love that filled her eyes. "I have wronged you, I know, but I have loved you so long. I know it now—at last!"

"Say that again!" he whispered, drawing her to his breast, while, in the dusky gloom, his eyes looked down on her with a glory of hope, so perfect in its joy that no words could have spoken half so eloquently the deathless love of his heart.

"Say that I love you?" she answered, while the hot colour flushed her cheeks, and her eyes sank before his own. "I have loved you—always, Raoul!"

So low, so sweet, so passion-fraught, the tender words fell on his ear; and as his breathless kisses sealed the lips that uttered them, his arms pressed closer round her, his heart throbbed with rapture keen as pain, wild as passion.

The fragrant wind moved softly through the silence; the deep chimes of distant bells tolled the hour from the lighted city; the rich odours of dew-laden flowers were heavy on the air; but to those two lovers in the shadows of the ilex-woods, there was no sound, no breath, no music, save the wild delight of that long embrace with which they sealed their love-words, and satisfied the hunger of their hearts at last.

"It seems almost wrong to be so happy," said Vivienne at last, as she raised her head and looked at him with eyes lustrous

as the stars, humid and gentle with the infinite tenderness of her new-found joy,—“almost wrong when *he* is only just laid in his grave.”

“Nay, my dearest, our happiness does him no wrong now,” said Raoul reverently. “It was his own wish to see us reconciled—to know us at rest from all these cruel jealousies, these weary doubts that have tormented us so long. If he sees us now, Vivienne, I think his tender, faithful heart rejoices in our joy. The joy we owe to him, for I think I should never have come back to you but for that message. Why were you so cruel, my love?”

“I was almost mad with doubt and pain, I think,” said Vivienne sadly. “I believe that woman poisoned all my trust and faith by what she said, Raoul, for I never felt the same again.”

“And you thought I loved her?” said Raoul reproachfully. “Oh, my treasure! no woman living ever won a thought of love from me but *you*! Some day I will tell you the story of my acquaintance with her, and its disastrous consequences—but not now, my dearest, not now; I will not sully the brightness of an hour like this by any history of the sin and shame of other years.”

And Vivienne lays her head again on the noble, faithful heart whose love is all her own, and a great silence falls upon them both; but no speech can be more eloquent than those soft caresses, no words more tender than those sighs which tremble on their lips in the very fulness of their deep content.

Love is enough for them now—the love they have won through much pain and sorrow, through the anguish of fears and disbelief—the love that will never leave them in life again; for time cannot chill, nor any woe appal, nor Death himself unsever it.

In the golden pomp of the early autumn, when the trees were yet bronzed and reddened with the flush of the waning-summer, there was great joy and rejoicing at Renouveau. The château was thrown open to the daylight, the long-closed windows were draped with costly hangings; the grand reception-rooms, with their lavish magnificence and perfect appointments and choice works of art, were all prepared for the new châtelaine who was coming to her home at last.

The great flag waved from the tower with the De Verdreuil arms emblazoned on its silken folds; floral arches were erected in the park; great and numerous were the preparations of the household within, and the tenantry without; for the glad news had reached them that their young lord was still to reign there, that he had won for his bride the beautiful mistress of these fair domains, and that, in gaining her, they are not to lose him.

When the glory of the western sky was at its brightest, when the grey towers and painted oriels were golden with the last rays of sunset, when the great stretching woods of park and forest-land were flooded with mellow light, a carriage drove swiftly through the open entrance-gates, and a great shout of welcome rent the silence of the autumn eve.

Through the stately avenues, the flower-arched aisles, beneath the sunless shadows of beech and oak and elm-woods, Raoul de Verdreuil saw his home again, and saw it now with no shame to dim its beauty, no remorse to deaden its joy, for the glories of his race and the greatness of his ancestors were once more his own ; and though the memories of the past saddened his heart for one brief moment, the shadow passed as he looked on the woman beside him—the woman whose eyes met his with the dreaming, passionate tenderness of a love greater even than his dreams.

A few moments more, and those two, so long estranged, so cruelly wronged, stand proudly on the threshold of their home. Through the long line of bowing servants, who stand on either side of the grand hall, with its splendour of colouring, its festive draperies, its rich carvings, they pass on to the rooms beyond, and there, in the ruddy glow of the firelight—with the warmth and beauty of the autumn evening, lighting and cheering every familiar nook and corner—they pause at last. Their eyes meet, and memory is busy with them both.

Every light, every sound, comes to them like a familiar voice ; so much of pain, so much of sorrow, such tender, sad regrets are linked with this heritage of the race from which they spring. And Raoul's eyes grow soft and tender as a woman's as he gazes on all around, even as a long-banished exile gazes on the land for whose beauty he has hungered, for whose freedom he has pined, in years of anguish and of solitude.

And as he looked his sufferings were forgotten, his pride grew humble for very thankfulness, his heart grateful for very joy. The hopes of his youth, the passion of his dreams, the love of his life were restored to him ; and, as he folded her in his arms and let his lips rest on her own, the full, rich tide of a great joy swept over his heart—this moment repaid him for all his suffering.

He had foresworn vengeance, he had given mercy ; he had learnt the great lesson of self-conquest in the fiercest temptings of a man's worst passions ; and the conquest had won him a rich and great reward. From the grave of the past the future won its fairest promises—the present its deepest peace.

L'ENVOI.

SWEET, sighing winds, balmy with summer's breath, heavy with summer's fragrance, sweep over the dew-steeped grasses of an Italian burying-ground. A young girl stands by the side of a grave, and with tear-dimmed eyes, which see neither earth nor sky nor rosy twilight, she lays a wreath of fresh-gathered flowers on the marble tablet. It bears only a name and a date—the name of Albert Hoffmann.

The girl who long ago let her life live in the silent, unreturned love she had given the young artist, is, after all, the one most faithful to his memory now. She has no bliss of wedded happiness, no cares of the busy world, no engrossing duties of rank and station to dim her memory of the past. She kneels beside his last resting-place, faithful in death as in life. She knows he is all her own, for none can rob her of his memory now.

The roses and lilies lie on the cold, white marble of his tomb ; the far-off echoes of the city's mirth float by on the breezes of the summer night. The graves are white against the shadows of the cypress-trees, and the moonlight sleeps on the olive-groves beyond.

The fair-haired German maiden kneels by her lover's grave. In life she was nothing to him ; in death she can claim him, think of him, weep over him as she will. There is no eye to see her in the loneliness around save the pitying eye of Heaven ; there is no ear to hear her wild prayers, her tearless sobs, save the Ear that is never deaf to human misery, or heedless of human prayer.

So we leave the young artist to the rest that only comes once to our weary lives—to the peace which will only reach its uttermost perfection in another world, with the smiles of God and the glories of heaven !

THE END.

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